

## Strategic communication of EU affairs: an analysis of legislative behaviour on Twitter

Resul Umit

### ABSTRACT

An influential literature underlines how much parliamentary communication of European Union (EU) affairs could offer to democracy in the EU. Yet members of parliaments (MPs) seem unmoved by their potential. MPs are strategic about their communication, and this study questions the suitability of EU affairs to their re-election strategies. Analysing the messages posted on Twitter by regional and national MPs from Ireland and the United Kingdom over a four-month period, this article shows that clear electoral safety and strong political responsibility increase the communication of EU affairs. This suggests that the low electoral benefits and the high political complexity of EU affairs are significant deterrents to parliamentary communication of these affairs. As a result, the voices of Eurosceptic MPs echo disproportionately louder on Twitter.

**KEYWORDS** Members of parliaments; communication; European Union; text analysis; Twitter

### Introduction

Involvement of parliaments in European Union (EU) affairs is often seen as the most likely remedy for the so-called problem of *democratic deficit* in the EU. This requires parliaments to fulfil their representational functions accordingly, and among others, for example, inform their citizens about EU affairs. Indeed, a recent but influential literature emphasises how much Europeanisation of parliamentary communication could offer to democracy in the EU (Auel, 2007; Auel & Raunio, 2014b; Rauh, 2015; Raunio, 2011). Early empirical evidence, however, shows that parliaments do not live up to this potential (Auel, 2015; Auel & Raunio, 2014a; Saalfeld, 2003). This raises the question of how parliamentary communication of EU affairs, or lack thereof, can be explained. What provides members of parliaments (MPs) the incentives for, or holds them back from, communicating EU affairs? These questions are central to understanding the communication function of parliaments in the EU, but the determinants of individual legislative behaviour have never been analysed in this context before.

This article examines the communicative behaviour of regional and national MPs. To be able to explain parliamentary communication of EU

affairs, we need to go beyond parties and national parliaments, where the existing literature stops (for overviews, see Ladrech, 2009; Rozenberg & Heffler, 2015; Winzen, 2010), and analyse the behaviour of individual MPs who make up these institutions. Regional and national MPs may not be the representatives legislating EU affairs, but the discursive aspects of representation – as rekindled by recent theories of political representation (Mansbridge, 2003, 2004; Saward, 2010; Urbinati, 2006) – require communication and not necessarily legislation. Therefore, their involvement in the communication of EU affairs could be an important step towards democratising the supranational entity because ‘if MPs raise European issues, they offer a remedy to the otherwise opaque procedures, the overwhelming complexity, and the difficult attribution of political responsibility in decision-making beyond the nation state’ (Rauh, 2015, p. 118).

Nevertheless, the underlying incentive behind the legislative behaviour of communication is not what it could offer to society, but rather what it could offer to the legislators themselves. MPs communicate with their citizens not only because it builds trust and creates legitimacy (Fenno, 1978) but also because it helps them get re-elected (Mayhew, 1974). Thus, how much MPs communicate depends on their re-election strategies, and so does the choice of which political affairs to communicate. Specifically, I theorise that MPs will not communicate EU affairs unless it suits their re-election prospects.

Besides extending the empirical evidence to include individual MPs, this study contributes to the literature in two further ways. I analysed 414,490 messages posted on Twitter by regional as well as national MPs from Ireland and the UK between 1 October 2014 and 31 January 2015. First, this breaks the complete dependence on formal channels of communication as a data source. Because communication channels have their own working logics (De Wilde, 2014), it is a methodological necessity to broaden the literature to more informal but direct channels such as the social media. While the existing studies remain limited to plenary debates and parliamentary questions, this paper provides new evidence from Twitter – a popular social media platform. As Nagler and Tucker (2015) suggest, Twitter provides us with ‘an unfiltered look’ into MPs’ strategic choices about what to communicate.

Second, this study introduces the regional level to the literature on parliamentary communication of EU affairs. Existing literature on the Europeanisation of parliaments has developed largely over the national parliaments, leading to the calls for research that does not ignore the subnational level (see, for example, Carter, 2013). As the regional parliaments with legislative powers find an increasing recognition within the EU (Abels, 2013), their role in the multi-level parliamentary system has recently started to attract some scholars’ attention (see the contributions in Abels & Eppler, 2016).

However, their involvement in the parliamentary *communication* of the supranational affairs is yet to be investigated. Studies in this literature cannot be complete without taking different levels of parliaments as well as different channels of communication into account.

The results indicate that issue salience and credibility of MPs affect who communicates which issues. This suggests that the low electoral benefits and the high political complexity of EU affairs are significant deterrents to the parliamentary communication of these affairs. The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. After a review of the existing literature on parliamentary communication of EU affairs, the theory section details seven hypotheses based on rational choice models of legislative behaviour. The subsequent section explains the cases, data, and the three-step method of content analysis. The results section then presents the descriptive analysis and multivariate tests of the hypotheses. Finally, the paper concludes with remarks on why the results of these tests might be politically significant for the EU.

### **Literature: parliamentary communication of EU affairs**

The communication function of parliaments has recently been at the top of the ‘agenda for future research’ in the area of parliaments in the EU (Raunio, 2009). Arguing that parliament is a platform to communicate not only among the representatives but also to the general public, the literature following this agenda concentrates on plenary debates and parliamentary questions. Despite an increase in debates on EU affairs over time, the results generally show a poor communication effort by national parliaments: according to the latest figures, national parliaments devote less than 2 per cent of oral questions and around 7 per cent of all plenary time to EU affairs (Auel, 2015).

The majority of empirical evidence portrays a similarly pessimistic outlook for democratisation through Europeanisation of parliamentary communication (see the contributions in Auel & Raunio, 2014a). For example, comparing the plenary debates in the national parliaments of four member states between 2002 and 2010, Auel and Raunio (2014b) show that institutional and party-related dynamics rule what is debated in the plenary, leaving very little room to discuss EU affairs on the parliamentary floor. Likewise, De Ruiter (2014) finds that opposition parties in the UK or the Netherlands are not making use of the reports from open methods of coordination – a rich source of critical information on the performance of governments in EU affairs – to hold the government publicly to account. Besides, studying the parliamentary questions asked in the French *Assemblée Nationale*, Navarro and Brouard (2014) report that the overall proportion of EU-related questions directed at the French government was in decline at least until 2007. However, those who study a more recent time period show that parliamentary

communication of EU affairs has been increasing over time (Rauh, 2015) and particularly as a result of the eurozone crisis (Auel & Höing, 2015; Puntischer Riekmann & Wydra, 2013; Wendler, 2014).

On two notable occasions, the literature points to the level of individual MPs to provide hypothetical explanations for the lack of parliamentary communication of EU affairs. Saalfeld (2003) argues that there are strong disincentives for MPs to communicate these affairs because ‘the decision-making process in the EU tends to combine low levels of issue salience with high levels of uncertainty about outcomes and responsibilities’ (p. 91). This is the worst of both worlds – low benefits and high costs – for MPs seeking re-election with scarce resources. Similarly, Pollak and Slominski (2014) reason that ‘individual MPs are reluctant to engage in communicating on Europe as it is neither rewarded by their political party nor considered advantageous in terms of vote winning’ (p. 112). This article provides the first empirical investigation of these rational-choice assumptions, which remain untested in the literature. Otherwise, we cannot understand why so few plenary debates and parliamentary questions are about EU affairs without examining the strategies that individual MPs develop with regard to EU affairs.

### Theoretical expectations: rational MPs and communication of EU affairs

The theoretical assumptions of this study stem from the idea that political actors behave purposefully in pursuit of their preferences (Downs, 1957). MPs might pursue various goals while in parliament, but these all come down to one precondition: re-election as an MP (Cain, Ferejohn, & Fiorina, 1987; Epstein, 1967; Mayhew, 1974). Therefore, MPs strategically choose their actions to secure their re-election. They have to choose, and they have to do so strategically, because they compete for parliamentary seats under the constraints of scarce resources and institutional rules.

All the activities that MPs are involved in to win elections necessitate communication with constituents. Mayhew (1974, pp. 49–77) defines three such activities: *advertising* (their own name in order to create a positive image among the electorate); *credit claiming* (for actual policies that their electorate benefits from); and *position taking* (on any issue that might interest their electorate). One could also add *blaming* as the fourth activity. Because there is a zero-sum competition for seats, besides cultivating support – by advertising, credit claiming, and position taking – MPs also blame competitors to make sure the others risk losing support as a party of their ‘blame management strategies’ (McGraw, 1991; McGraw, Best, & Timpone, 1995; McGraw, Timpone, & Bruck, 1993). Re-election strategies may involve one or all of these activities, but irrespective of their individual choice, constituents need

to be informed by some form of communication about the MPs' name, claims, positions, or blames.

The content of this communication is also a key component of any re-election strategy. In order to maximise the return of their electorally oriented activities, MPs purposefully put emphasis on the communication of specific policy areas. In this sense, saliency and credibility are the two important factors. First, the electoral benefit of involvement in a policy area depends on its saliency among constituents (Saalfeld, 2003, p. 76). Hence, communicating issues that matter to their constituents can be a rational strategy. Saliency increases the potential votes that MPs can cultivate by being involved in an issue area because constituents are more likely to base their voting preferences on the particular issue areas that matter to them the most.

Second, although MPs are free to choose any issue to communicate to their constituents, their choices need to be perceived as credible to maximise their re-election prospects. Credibility is important because, for instance, '[f]or a voter lacking an easy way to sort out valid from invalid claims the sensible recourse is skepticism' (Mayhew, 1974, p. 60). Besides, politicians, to say the least, are often not the most trusted individuals. However, Mayhew (1974, pp. 81–105) argues that the organisation of legislators in 'salient structural units' such as committees and parties increases the credibility of their communications. For example, while any MP can claim credit for a bridge built in their constituency, it might increase the credibility of this claim if an MP is a member of a committee in charge of infrastructure or a party in government. The more credible the constituents find a claim, in return, the more effective their communication will be to contribute towards their re-election.

Against this background, the following subsections therefore develop two sets of hypotheses based on the salience of EU affairs and credibility of MPs in these affairs.

### ***Saliency of EU affairs***

A first set of theoretical expectations is related to the salience of EU affairs. Most EU issues have limited salience among European citizens (Moravcsik, 2002). So much so that Europeans do not vote primarily on EU affairs even in elections to the European Parliament (Hix & Marsh, 2007, 2011; Reif & Schmitt, 1980). Despite its increasing influence on vote choice in national elections (De Vries, 2007, 2010), the degree of EU issue salience remains lower than most other issues. For example, on average, only 3 per cent of the electorate in the UK saw the EU as the most important issue facing their country between October 2014 and January 2015 (Ipsos MORI, 2015) – the period of analysis in this paper.

The low salience makes the personal involvement in communicating EU affairs relatively less beneficial for MPs seeking re-election. Indeed, it is argued elsewhere that MPs consider EU affairs as an electorally unrewarding area (Pollak & Slominski, 2014; Saalfeld, 2003). Rational MPs would be better off focusing their electorally motivated communication activities in another policy area with higher saliency among the voters, depending on the safety of their seat. As the electoral safety of a seat decreases, each vote becomes more critical for MPs. Empirical analyses of legislative behaviour repeatedly show that MPs who only marginally won the previous election concentrate on their re-election seeking activities more than the others (Cain et al., 1987; Gaines, 1998; Heitshusen, Young, & Wood, 2005; Norton & Wood, 1993). As marginal MPs are more likely to avoid low salience issues, I expect that the communication of EU affairs is disproportionately left to electorally safer MPs.

*H1: The higher the electoral safety of their seat, the more likely MPs are to communicate EU affairs.*

Seniority in parliament is likely to create a similar effect because electoral insecurity is felt most strongly among the newly elected legislators (Fenno, 1978; Norton & Wood, 1993). As the opportunity to build a personal reputation with their voters increases with time, senior MPs benefit electorally from being in parliament longer than their junior colleagues. This decreases the need to avoid communicating low salience issues such as EU affairs for re-election seeking MPs.

*H2: The longer the incumbency of MPs, the more likely they are to communicate EU affairs.*

The general low salience of EU affairs is the norm among European political parties, leaving the ownership of the issue to Eurosceptic parties. Studies show that European elites (Müller, Jenny, & Ecker, 2012) and more specifically mainstream political parties (Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Mattila & Raunio, 2006) support European integration more than their voters do in most EU member states. Besides, parties are often internally divided over the EU (Hix, 1999). Therefore, the communication of EU affairs carries a high risk of sounding disagreeable to voters and party leaders. It would be a safer choice for most MPs to talk about the traditional issues that make their parties mainstream in the first place.

For MPs from Eurosceptic parties, however, this creates an electoral opportunity. As the mainstream parties try to avoid communicating about the EU, there emerges a gap for parties which are better aligned with the voters to capitalise on public Euroscepticism. Eurosceptic parties are particularly successful in mobilising the masses around this issue (De Vries & Edwards, 2009), and the election results show that active communication of Eurosceptic

positions wins votes for these parties (De Vries & Hobolt, 2012). By communicating EU affairs to their constituents, MPs from Eurosceptic parties can bring the debate to an area where they would like elections to be fought on. There they advertise themselves as representatives of the Eurosceptic public, take pleasing positions for the public to hear, and blame everything that is wrong on the EU.

*H3: The higher the Euroscepticism of their party, the more likely are the MPs to communicate EU affairs.*

Eurosceptic parties can organise the demand for communication of EU affairs as well, without actually winning any seats. In constituencies that they unsuccessfully contest, Eurosceptic candidates can nevertheless challenge the incumbents to address EU affairs. Besides, their Eurosceptic campaign can increase the salience of these affairs among the voters, and at the very least their relative electoral success shows incumbents from other parties how much voter demand there is for EU affairs in their constituency. Re-election seeking MPs need to be responsive to the Eurosceptic challengers and the organised interest for EU affairs in their constituency. Therefore, the incentives for MPs to communicate EU affairs increase with the electoral challenge of Eurosceptic competitors.

*H4: The higher the electoral challenge of Euroscepticism in their constituency, the more likely are the MPs to communicate EU affairs.*

### ***Credibility of MPs in EU affairs***

A second set of theoretical expectations is related to the credibility of MPs in EU affairs. Legislative power is divided or shared among various actors at different levels in the EU, making the attribution of responsibility more challenging than in national politics (Rauh, 2015; Wilson & Hobolt, 2015). While this might help Eurosceptic MPs to blame the EU for everything, complexity makes it harder for individual MPs to claim credit for their personal achievements in the multi-level system. Studies show that ordinary citizens find it complicated to locate where credit is due in multi-level systems such as the EU (De Vries, Van der Brug, Van Egmond, & Van der Eijk, 2011; Johns, 2011; for the same finding in other multi-level systems, see also Arceneaux, 2006; Cutler, 2004, 2008). However, ordinary citizens are not alone in being confused by EU affairs. Saalfeld (2003) argues that responsibility attribution in the EU is puzzling for MPs as well. Therefore, the problem with the communication of EU affairs is not only that constituents might be indifferent to or sceptic about what MPs claim as their personal achievements in EU affairs, but also that MPs may not think there is something to claim for in the first place.

The role of ‘salient structural units’ is especially important for MPs’ strategic choice of communication under these conditions. Units that attribute responsibility to its members in EU affairs decrease the complexity for both sides of parliamentary communication. Specifically, MPs from national parliaments, governing parties, and European affairs committees are more likely to communicate EU affairs because their position in these units makes credit claiming a more viable option for them. These MPs can ‘make things happen and be perceived to make things happen’ (Mayhew, 1974, p. 92) in EU affairs. Therefore, they have an advantage over MPs from regional parliaments, opposition parties, or other committees, whose options are rather limited to advertising, position taking, or blaming.

Between the different levels of parliaments as units, national parliaments have undoubtedly a larger responsibility than regional parliaments in EU affairs. Following a gradual increase in their rights and duties over time, the Treaty of Lisbon further strengthened the role of national parliaments to participate in EU decision-making. National parliaments can now intervene in the European legislative process through the early warning mechanism (EWM), which makes them one of the most important actors in EU affairs (Cooper, 2012). However, the same cannot be said about regional parliaments, which have a much more limited role in EU affairs. For example, the same treaty leaves it to national parliaments to decide whether it is appropriate to consult regional parliaments in the context of the EWM. Therefore, the attribution of responsibility in EU affairs exists more clearly for members of national parliaments than regional parliaments.

*H5: National MPs are more likely to communicate EU affairs than regional MPs.*

Multi-level politics benefits the governments, which increase their power as opposed to legislatures (Putnam, 1988). This is especially true in the EU (Moravcsik, 1994), where the governments define the policy agenda and negotiate the division of jurisdictional competencies. Furthermore, ministers of national and – under certain conditions – regional governments form one of the two chambers in the EU besides the European Parliament. As a result, government parties have an advantage over the opposition in EU affairs in terms of information and power (Schmidt, 2006, p. 64), and they have a larger responsibility that comes with this advantage. For opposition MPs without such responsibility, credible communication options are limited to advertising, position taking, and blaming, while MPs from the governing parties can also more credibly claim credit in EU affairs.

*H6: MPs from governing parties are more likely to communicate EU affairs than MPs from opposition parties.*



Finally, irrespective of their parliamentary level or political party, one group of MPs who have clear responsibility in EU affairs are the members of committees in charge of EU issues. Both national parliaments (Bergman, 1997; Maurer & Wessels, 2001; Norton, 1996) and regional parliaments (Abels, 2013) created special committees to deal with EU politics. They soon became the main body where parliaments exercise their constitutionally secured rights in the EU. As parliamentary rights and duties have included scrutiny of more documents from more policy areas, their resources and thus capabilities have also improved over time. Besides documents, the majority of European affairs committees became active in scrutinising members of governments before and after European Council meetings as well (Raunio, 2005; Raunio & Hix, 2000; Saalfeld, 2005). As a result, Schneider, Rittberger, and Wonka (2014) show that members of these committees are more likely to be involved in activities related to EU affairs in German regional parliaments. I expect to find a similar effect of committee membership on the communication of EU affairs.

*H7: Members of European affairs committees are more likely to communicate EU affairs than non-member MPs.*

### Case selection, data, and methods

In order to test the hypotheses above, I analysed the messages posted on Twitter by MPs from Dáil Éireann, the House of Commons, Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales, and the Northern Ireland Assembly between the beginning of October 2014 and the end of January 2015. This case selection brings together similar parliaments in terms of overall institutionalisation and their role in EU affairs, but at the same time it provides sufficient variation in terms of key variables such as levels of Euroscepticism or voting systems.

These five parliaments are from two EU member states, Ireland and the UK, which ‘share a common political origin and each remains broadly representative of the Westminster model’ (Heitshusen et al., 2005, p. 34). This helps keep several factors constant, including the importance of social media as a channel between representatives and the represented. They also share the language. This allows all parliaments to be analysed with a single dictionary of keywords in English instead of multiple dictionaries, which avoids potential validity issues. Furthermore, the national parliaments in Ireland and the UK rank close together roughly in the middle of all other parliaments with regard to their role in EU affairs, such as controlling their governments in EU affairs (Auel, Rozenberg, & Tacea, 2015; Karlas, 2012; Winzen, 2012) or being involved in the transposition of EU directives (Sprungk, 2013). Although there is no such data at the regional

level, the selection of regional parliaments from the same member state to some extent controls for possible variation in their role. Finally, the case selection allows the chosen time frame to cover a non-electoral period for all parliaments under analysis. This ensures that the results are not affected by an election at any level of representation in the EU.

Despite these helpful similarities, there is a useful variation in the variables of interest. First, the level of Euroscepticism varies among the regional parliaments as well as between the national ones. The latest Eurobarometer (2016) opinion poll shows that Ireland has the most positive view of the Union among its 28 members while the UK has the fourth most negative. Likewise, the Brexit referendum exposed a division between the areas represented by the regional parliaments: Wales voted (53 per cent) to leave, but Northern Ireland (56 per cent) and Scotland (62 per cent) voted to remain. Second, the case selection includes all three main types of electoral system: first-past-the-post (*FPTP*) in the UK, single-transferable vote (*STV*) in Ireland and Northern Ireland, and mixed-member systems in Scotland and Wales. Therefore, a further variation of voting systems also exists within Scotland and Wales – *FPTP* and closed-list proportional representation (*PR*).

Table 1 provides the summary statistics on variables used in the analysis.<sup>1</sup> I obtained the majority of the data on independent variables from the official websites of the parliaments, political parties, and individual MPs themselves. These include binary variables to indicate whether MPs are the members of national parliaments (*National Parliament*) in the UK (*United Kingdom*), parties in regional or national government (*Government Party*), or the committees in charge of EU affairs (*EU Committee*) in these parliaments; and whether they are female (*Female MPs*). Also from the same data sources are the count variables for number of parliamentarians elected from a given

**Table 1.** Summary statistics.

Variable	Mean	Std deviation	Minimum	Maximum
<i>All Tweets (Exposure)</i>	492.85	670.58	1	6138
<i>EU-related Tweets</i>	10.89	22.43	0	278
<i>Electoral Safety</i>	0.96	0.79	0	2
<i>Seniority</i>	10.29	7.24	0	45
<i>Eurosceptic Party</i>	3.10	1.41	1.29	6.86
<i>Eurosceptic Challenge</i>	2.26	3.20	0	38.7
<i>National Parliament</i>	0.73	0.45	0	1
<i>Government Party</i>	0.58	0.49	0	1
<i>EU Committee</i>	0.05	0.22	0	1
<i>FPTP</i>	0.69	0.46	0	1
<i>STV</i>	0.24	0.43	0	1
<i>District Magnitude</i>	2.27	2.04	1	7
<i>EU Dissent</i>	4.28	2.06	0.71	7.29
<i>Age</i>	52.41	10.32	24	81
<i>Female MPs</i>	0.27	0.44	0	1
<i>United Kingdom</i>	0.85	0.36	0	1

district (*District Magnitude*), MPs' age (*Age*) and the number of years of service as parliamentarians (*Seniority*) as of 2015.

The parliamentary websites also provided the data on election results. To code *Electoral Safety* across different electoral systems, the seats are ranked as marginal (0), competitive (1), and safe (2) according to the results from the most recent elections. *Eurosceptic Challenge* is based on the vote share of parliaments' most Eurosceptic party. *Voting System* indicates whether MPs are elected under closed-list PR, FPTP, or STV systems. Finally, the two variables on party positioning on European integration – *Eurosceptic Party* and *EU Dissent* – are based on the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al., 2015). *Eurosceptic Party* denotes the position of the party that MPs are a member of, ranging from strongly favours (1) to strongly opposes (7) European integration. *EU Dissent* measures the degree of dissent on European integration within their party, ranging from completely united parties (0) to extremely divided parties (10).

The data for the dependent variable (*EU-related Tweets*) come from MPs' messages posted on Twitter. Legislative studies of this particular social media channel have, so far, largely focused on legislators' Twitter presence and activity around electoral campaigns (for extensive reviews, see Jungherr, 2014, 2016). Early studies found that legislators' party membership, age, gender, and seniority determine who uses Twitter and how often (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Lassen & Brown, 2011; Hemphill, Otterbacher, & Shapiro, 2013; Peterson, 2012). More recent research on the members of the European Parliament (MEPs), moreover, shows that voting systems, district magnitude, and seat safety are also important factors (Obholzer & Daniel, 2016; Scherperleel, Wohlgemuth, & Schmelzinger, 2016); presence and activity on Twitter increase with the incentives that these factors create for individual legislators to cultivate a personal vote. With regard to the content, Twitter seems to mimic legislative communication practices in both form and substance, where legislators 'broadcast' their typical messages to voters in a way that leaves very little room for interactive communication (Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010; Hemphill et al., 2013; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Sæbø, 2011).

If MPs' communicative behaviour on Twitter is similar to their behaviour elsewhere, as the literature suggests, Twitter data can provide opportunities to go beyond analysing the legislative attitude *toward social media* – a path that the existing literature is yet to develop. In this sense, although Twitter is only one of many channels of communication available to legislators, we can analyse their tweets to understand their strategic behaviour *toward communication* in general. Indeed, Twitter has quickly become an important platform for political communication in less than a decade since its appearance (Nagler & Tucker, 2015). For example, the websites of all five parliaments in this study provide the usernames of their members with a Twitter account, a sign that Twitter has established itself as a communication channel for MPs in

Ireland and the UK. From these websites, I retrieved the usernames of the existing MPs on 30 September 2014. I then collected the tweets from these usernames for the period between 1 October 2014 and 31 January 2015 through Twitter's application programming interface (API).<sup>2</sup>

I developed a three-step method to find the tweets that communicated EU affairs.<sup>3</sup> First, benefiting from a comprehensive glossary dedicated to EU terminology ([www.euabc.com](http://www.euabc.com)), I created a dictionary of EU keywords. Table A1 in the appendix provides this dictionary. I then automatically located the tweets that had at least one word in common with it. The dictionary was liberally put together in the sense that it included keywords that may – but do not necessarily have to – be related to EU affairs in order to increase the likelihood of catching all EU-related communication. For example, the keyword *Brussels* returned, among others, the following two tweets:

Brussels targets Amazon's Luxembourg tax deal

—Stewart Stevenson, Member of the Scottish Parliament, 7 October 2014

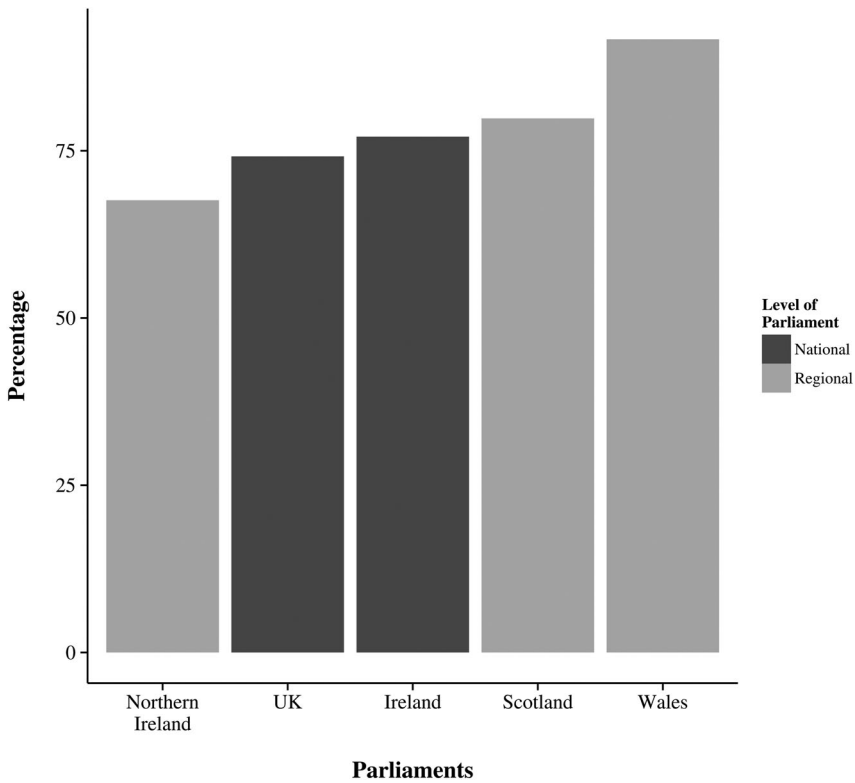
Back home from Brussels. Even in the rain Dublin is so beautiful. #LoveDublin

—Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, Member of Dáil Éireann, 11 December 2014

In total, the dictionary method returned 23,648 tweets. However, because of the risk that the keywords might be used in contexts (Nagler & Tucker, 2015) other than EU politics, I read and manually coded *all* of these tweets in the second step. To continue with the above example, I coded the former as '1' because it is related to EU affairs where *Brussels* refers to the EU institutions. However, I coded the latter as '0' because here *Brussels* refers to the city and the message is not about EU affairs. To test the inter-subjective replicability of this manual coding process, a second researcher coded a sample of these tweets. The results had scores well above acceptable standards in various tests. As a final step, to test the validity of the dictionary, I randomly selected and coded further tweets that the dictionary did not catch, taking the total number of manually coded tweets to 26,000. Out of these randomly chosen 2352 tweets, only five were about EU affairs. Further details on the replicability and validity tests as well as the codebook can also be found in the appendix.

## Results

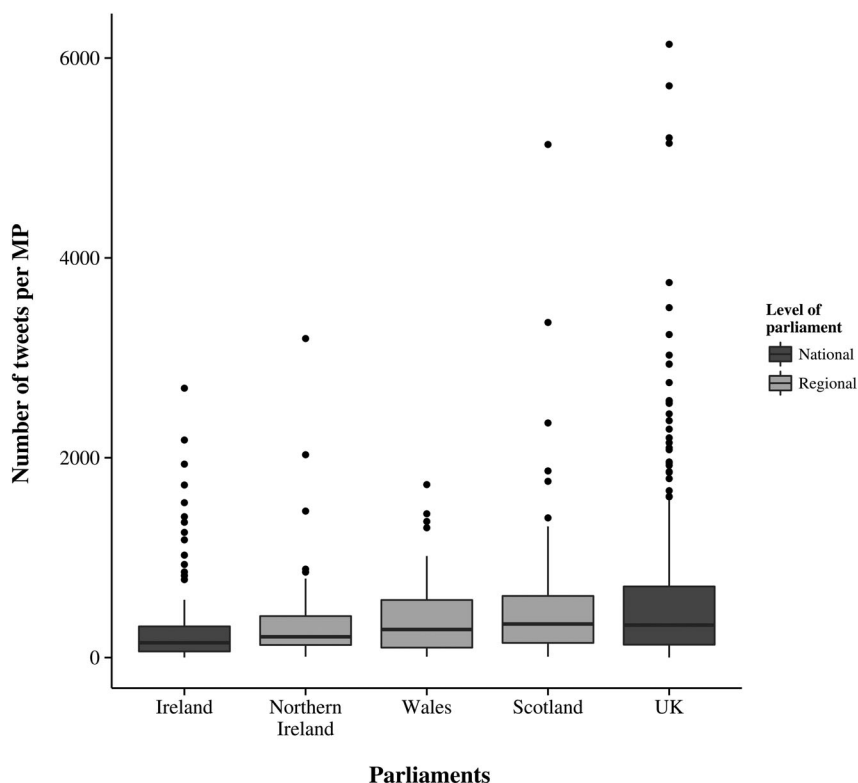
Figure 1 visualises the MPs' use of Twitter by parliament. Out of 1109 MPs serving in the five parliaments on 30 September 2014, 868 MPs (78.3 per cent) had an account on Twitter and 841 of them (75.8 per cent) actively used their accounts in the sense that they tweeted at least once between 1 October 2014 and 31 January 2015.<sup>4</sup> These numbers refer to a massive



**Figure 1.** Percentage of MPs active on Twitter.

increase in the popularity of Twitter as a communication channel for MPs in a short period of time. For example, in the House of Commons, compared with June 2009 when only 51 MPs actively used Twitter (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011), its popularity increased more than eightfold in just over five years.

MPs posted 414,490 messages, averaging 492.8 tweets per user, within the four-month period. In other words, MPs tweeted roughly four times per day on average. Figure 2 plots this data and shows that the most noticeable differences were among individual members of each parliament as well as between the parliaments of the two countries. To start with the latter, the Dáil Éireann and the House of Commons feature at the opposite ends of the figure, demonstrating the effect of country-level factors on the overall level of activity on Twitter. However, the level of parliament seems unrelated. The National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament are not far behind the House of Commons in second position, followed by the Northern Ireland Assembly. When it comes to individual members, the differences were even clearer. There were some very active MPs on Twitter compared with their colleagues in each parliament, with the most active MP being from the House of

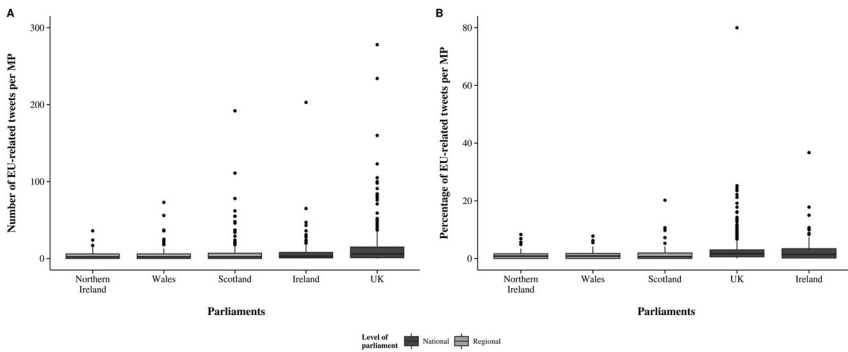


**Figure 2.** Twitter activity by parliament.

Commons: George Galloway with 6138 messages in total or 49.9 tweets posted per day in the period analysed.

The automated search of the database against the dictionary resulted in 23,648 tweets that included at least one of the keywords. However, the manual coding found that only 9160 tweets were about EU affairs whereas the remaining 14,498 tweets were not. Therefore, 2.2 per cent of all tweets were EU-related. In comparison with the findings from other channels of communication (Auel, 2015), this is slightly higher than the share of EU affairs in oral questions (1.67 per cent) but considerably less than the hours of debates (7.2 per cent) in parliaments.

Summing up the EU-related tweets for each MP, Figure 3 demonstrates how the number and percentage of EU-related tweets vary by parliament. Unlike the overall numbers, the figures for the EU-related tweets show a difference between national and regional parliaments. This means that MPs from national parliaments tweet more about the EU both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of their overall number of tweets. The *upper quartile* and *maximum* are higher for the Dáil Éireann than for the House



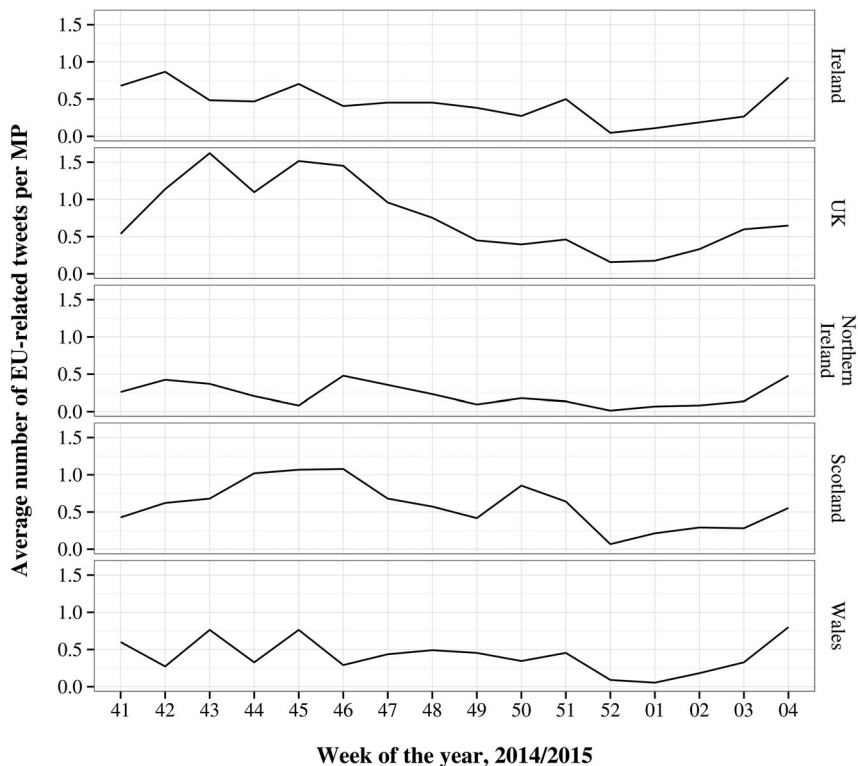
**Figure 3.** EU-related Twitter activity by parliament.

of Commons. This provides descriptive support for the hypothesis that the level of parliament matters for the communication of EU affairs, where the MPs from national parliaments are more likely than their colleagues from regional parliaments to communicate EU politics.

The descriptive results also provide *face validity* for the methods used to identify the EU-related messages. This is indicated by the fact that the 'leaders' in the figure, both (Figure 3(A)) the MP with the highest number and (Figure 3(B)) the one with the highest share of EU-related tweets, are among the usual suspects. The highest number belongs to Douglas Carswell, the first MP in the House of Commons to represent the Eurosceptic United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), with 278 EU-related messages in four months. Percentagewise, however, with 80 per cent of all tweets being about the EU, it is Bill Cash, who is not only a prominent Eurosceptic MP but also the chair of the House of Commons' European Scrutiny Committee.

On average, MPs posted 10.9 EU-related messages on Twitter during the period under analysis. However, there was a large variance, with a standard deviation of 22.4 tweets. For example, besides the top-end outliers mentioned above, there were also others who seemed not to be interested in communicating EU affairs; 178 MPs (21.2 per cent) did not post a single message about EU affairs between 1 October 2014 and 31 January 2015.

How did the communication of EU affairs unfold over the period under analysis? Figure 4 plots the average number of EU-related tweets posted by the MPs in each parliament. It shows that EU affairs never completely disappear from the agenda of MPs, even during Christmas and the holiday season around weeks 51 and 52. Parliament-specific ups and downs, however, are prominent in the data. For example, the average number of EU-related tweets peaked among the members of the House of Commons during week 43. This week saw the plenary debate of the second reading of the European Union (Referendum) Bill 2014–15, which led to widespread discussion of the EU.

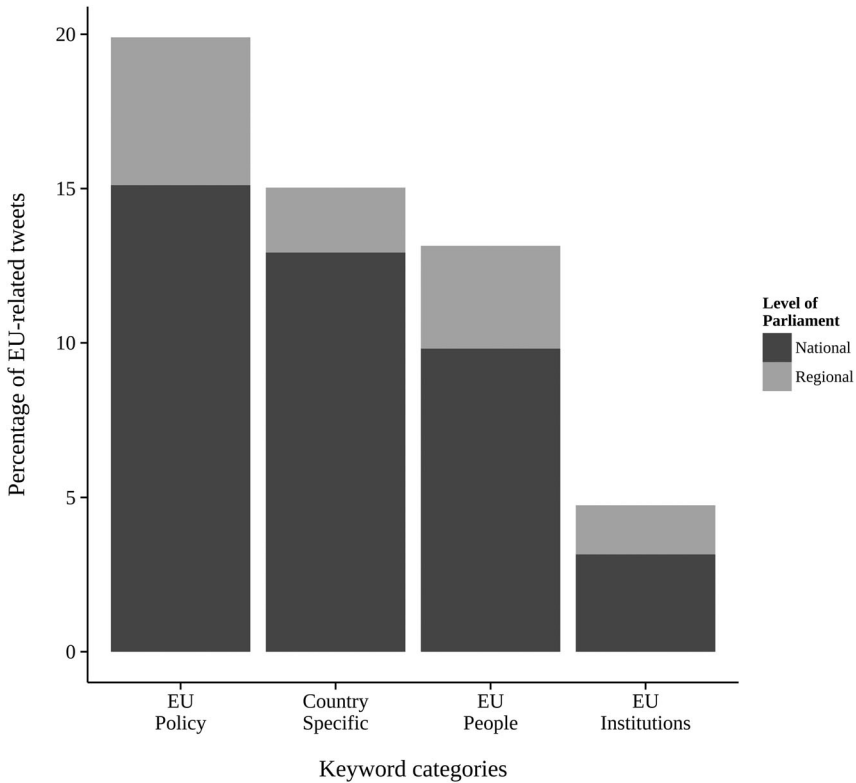


**Figure 4.** Weekly average of EU-related tweets.

### *Content of the EU-related tweets*

Over 6 per cent of all EU-related tweets indeed included the keyword *referendum*, the third most common after *MEP* (9.7 per cent) and *TTIP* (8.9 per cent). In fact, the most prominent keywords were all among the relatively salient aspects of EU affairs. Figure 5 demonstrates the prominence of keyword categories<sup>5</sup> in EU-related tweets. It suggests that most of the EU-related tweets were about policies. Beside the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), controversial trade negotiations between the EU and US during the period under analysis, MPs posted a considerable number of messages about free movement and agriculture among the other policies in this category. Next was the category of keywords related to country-specific aspects of EU affairs, including the then upcoming UK referendum on EU membership or Ireland's bailout by the EU. Albeit to a lesser extent, MPs were also interested in affairs in other EU member states, such as the government-debt crisis in Greece. As the figure shows, the regional parliaments' share of EU-related tweets is the smallest in this category, suggesting





**Figure 5.** Keywords in EU-related tweets.

that regional MPs are less likely to communicate country-specific EU affairs out of other categories.

The third category of tweets was about EU politicians, most notably the MEPs. There was some evidence of party-political communication in these tweets, where MPs promoted the MEPs from their own party or criticised the others. For example, several such messages unfavourably portrayed the MEPs from UKIP – the UK’s Eurosceptic challenger party with a significantly larger presence in the European Parliament than in regional or national parliaments. Keywords for the European Commissioners as well as the presidents of the EU institutions were also prominent in this category, but surprisingly only seven tweets were about the outgoing and incoming presidents of the European Council – Herman Van Rompuy and Donald Tusk – suggesting a low relevance of this post in the eyes of the MPs. Within the final category of keywords for EU institutions, the European Commission attracted by far the largest share (3.2 per cent) of references, followed by the European Central Bank (0.5 per cent). The latter was especially salient for the Irish MPs, due primarily to the role of the Bank in the bailout programme.

Nevertheless, the share of EU-related tweets by regional MPs was the highest in this category, with almost a third of all tweets about EU institutions coming from the regional level.

A qualitative reading of a sample of EU-related tweets suggests that, for many MPs, the area of EU affairs is rather unsuitable for claiming credit. Out of 100 randomly chosen tweets about EU affairs, only nine conveyed credit-claiming messages. Other types of electorally oriented activity had significantly higher and somewhat similar shares. Position taking was the most popular activity, and 35 tweets communicated where MPs stood on various issues in EU affairs. Advertising was closely behind; 33 tweets were posted to promote MPs themselves, their colleagues, or parties. The remaining 23 messages were shifting the blame in EU affairs on to other actors. Comparatively, therefore, credit claiming as an electorally oriented activity was found in only a minority of messages about EU affairs. Overall, the content of the EU-related tweets provides support for the effect of saliency and credibility on strategic communication.

### *Determinants of communicating EU affairs*

Based on the share of EU-related messages within the overall number of tweets per MP, this article presents an analysis of the determinants of communicating EU affairs using negative binomial regressions with a control for exposure time. Negative binomial regression stands out as the appropriate model because: (1) the dependent variable is a count variable; (2) the variance is well above the mean number of EU-related tweets; and (3) there was no separate process creating the zero counts.<sup>6</sup> However, as is evident from the large variance in total number of tweets (see [Table 1](#), *All Tweets*), MPs do not spend an equal amount of time on Twitter. This necessitates adding *All Tweets* to the regression models as exposure time – an offset variable used in count models to adjust for such variances (Hilbe, 2011) – in order to control for the fact that MPs who used Twitter frequently had more time to tweet about EU affairs as well. Essentially, the use of exposure time turns the models into rate models, allowing us to analyse the proportional differences in prioritising the communication of EU affairs among all the other issues.

[Table 2](#) presents the results in two models based on different interpretations of *Electoral Safety*, both providing support for the hypotheses. In Model 1, where it is treated as a continuous variable, the results show that *Electoral Safety* significantly increases MPs' communication of EU affairs. Model 2 provides a further test for the effect of *Electoral Safety* by including a fixed effect for each coding category. It demonstrates that the positive and significant effect found in Model 1 is driven by completely safe seats. More specifically, a change from a marginal to a safe seat increases the expected share of EU-related tweets by 30.3 per cent. The change from a marginal to

**Table 2.** Negative binomial estimates and percentage change in expected count for EU-related tweets.

	Model 1			Model 2		
	Coefficient	Standard error	%	Coefficient	Standard error	%
<i>Electoral Safety</i>	0.134**	0.050	14.3			
<i>Competitive</i>				0.186	0.099	20.4
<i>Safe</i>				0.264**	0.100	30.3
<i>Seniority</i>	0.020**	0.007	2.0	0.020**	0.007	2.0
<i>Eurosceptic Party</i>	0.159**	0.050	17.2	0.160**	0.050	17.4
<i>Eurosceptic Challenge</i>	0.034*	0.014	3.4	0.033*	0.014	3.4
<i>National Parliament</i>	0.595***	0.146	81.4	0.597***	0.146	81.7
<i>Government Party</i>	0.289**	0.101	33.4	0.285**	0.101	32.9
<i>EU Committee</i>	1.011***	0.183	174.8	1.012***	0.183	175.0
<i>Voting System</i>						
<i>FPTP</i>	-0.238	0.581	-21.2	-0.260	0.582	-22.9
<i>STV</i>	-0.692	0.404	-49.9	-0.729	0.408	-51.8
<i>District Magnitude</i>	0.026	0.101	2.7	0.022	0.102	2.2
<i>EU Dissent</i>	-0.068	0.041	-6.6	-0.068	0.041	-6.6
<i>Age</i>	0.011*	0.005	1.1	0.011*	0.005	1.1
<i>Female MPs</i>	-0.304***	0.089	-26.2	-0.309***	0.089	-26.6
<i>United Kingdom</i>	-0.521	0.442	-40.6	-0.520	0.441	-40.6
<i>Constant</i>	-4.880***	0.618	n.a.	-4.872***	0.618	n.a.
<i>N</i>		751			751	

Notes: The dependent variable is the number of EU-related tweets posted by MPs. Both models estimated via negative binomial regression. % denotes percentage change in expected count for unit increase in independent variables. *Exposure* is set to *All Tweets* with its coefficient constrained to be unity. *PR* is the excluded category of *Voting System* in both models, and *Marginal* is the excluded category of *Electoral Safety* in Model 2.

\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

competitive seats increases the expected share by 20.4 per cent, but this increase is not statistically significant. Overall, both models confirm Hypothesis 1, that the communication of low salience issues such as EU affairs increases with electoral safety. Indeed, MPs are significantly more likely to communicate EU affairs when they feel completely safe in their seats.

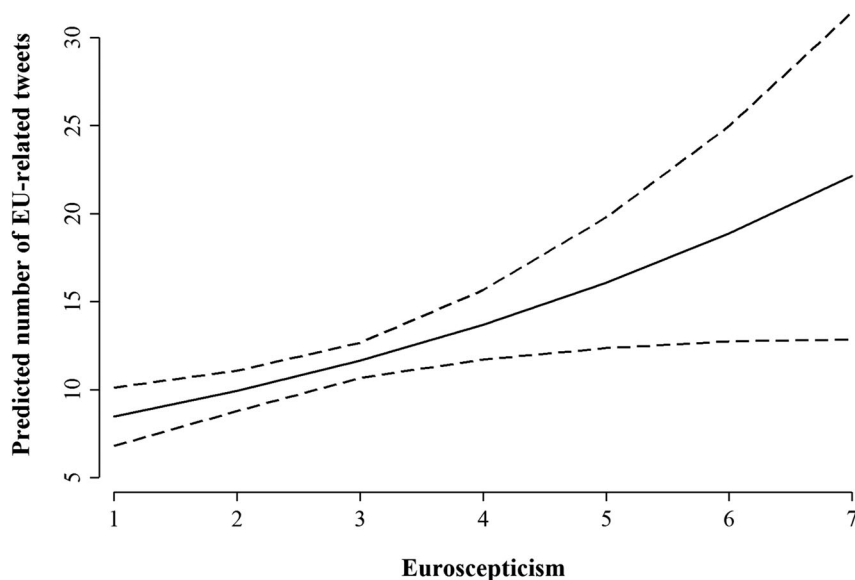
*Seniority* provides further evidence for the electoral connection of MPs' strategic approach to communication. Everything else – including their electoral marginality – being equal, senior MPs allow themselves to communicate EU affairs significantly more than do their junior colleagues in parliament. According to the models in Table 2, every year an MP serves in parliament leads to a 2 per cent increase in the expected rate of EU-related tweets. In line with the theory that long-term incumbency creates a different source of electoral safety, *Seniority* decreases the need to be involved in electorally oriented activities such as prioritising the communication of high-salience issues instead of EU affairs (*H2*).

What happens if these issues have high saliency for the MPs' political party? The results show that, in the case of the MPs from Eurosceptic parties, it affects strategic communication positively. According to Model

2, every unit on the scale of Euroscepticism is associated with a 17.4 per cent increase in the expected share of EU-related messages. This confirms the hypothesis that supply-side salience contributes to the communication of EU affairs by Eurosceptic MPs (*H3*). Figure 6 visualises the effects of Euroscepticism, showing that the communication of EU affairs more than doubles between the extremes of the scale: while MPs from parties that are strongly in favour of the European integration are predicted to post roughly nine EU-related messages in four months, this number is about 22 messages for MPs who are members of parties that strongly oppose the integration.

The varying levels of demand affect the strategic communication in the same way, indicated by the positive and significant coefficient for *Eurosceptic Challenge*. For every percentage of vote share achieved by their Eurosceptic competitors, MPs are predicted to post 3.4 per cent more EU-related messages on Twitter. This provides further support for the overall argument that issue saliency is a strong determinant of legislative communication strategies.

Next, turning to the three binary variables concerning the credibility of MPs (*H5–H7*), the results demonstrate that *National Parliament*, *Government Party*, and *EU Committee* are all significant predictors of communicating EU affairs. MPs from these units are expected to post significantly higher proportions of messages related to EU affairs on Twitter. Among the three,



**Figure 6.** Predicted number of EU-related tweets.

Notes: The figure is based on Model 2. All other variables held at their median (ordinal) or mean (continuous) values.

being a member of the committee in charge of EU affairs looms large as being the strongest predictor. Continuing with Model 2, this increases the expected rate of EU-related messages by 175 per cent compared with the members of other committees. Similarly, national MPs post 81.7 per cent more EU-related messages than regional MPs. There is a relatively smaller but nonetheless significant effect of being a member of the parties in government, which increases the rate of EU-related tweets by 32.9 per cent compared with the MPs from opposition parties.

These results hold in the presence of the control variables typical to the studies of legislative behaviour. Among these covariates, this study finds MPs' age and gender to be significant factors behind their strategic communication of EU affairs. On average, being a year older increases the expected rate of EU-related messages by 1.1 per cent. Given that age is the single most important reason for not seeking re-election (Byrne & Theakston, 2015), one could argue that older MPs are less concerned with losing their seats and therefore that they can allow themselves to communicate low salient affairs as well. With respect to gender, female MPs are expected to post a 27.1 per cent smaller share of tweets on EU affairs. This is in line with the finding that female legislators are less likely to claim credit for personal achievements in general and especially so in policy issues (Fridkin & Kenney, 2014). On the contrary, other covariates such *Voting System*, *District Magnitude*, or *EU Dissent* do not have a statistically significant effect on the outcome.

## Conclusion

This paper has extended the empirical evidence on parliamentary communication of EU affairs to individual-level legislative behaviour on social media among the members of not only national but also regional parliaments. Based on the argument that MPs are strategic about their communication choices, it has questioned the suitability of EU affairs to re-election strategies. As a significant portion of communication between representatives and the represented takes place outside the formal channels, it is important to analyse alternative channels of communication such as the social media.

Drawing on close to half a million tweets posted by regional and national MPs from Ireland and the UK during a four-month period, this study found that only 2.2 per cent of the messages were about EU affairs. The multivariate analysis provided insights into why the communication of EU affairs might take up as little as a few per cent of overall parliamentary communication. The communication of EU affairs increases with electoral safety and seniority in parliament. Also contributing to the EU debate are the MPs who are from Eurosceptic parties or otherwise, who are electorally challenged by the candidates from these parties. This suggests that issue salience, on both the supply

and demand sides, is an important factor explaining who communicates EU affairs. The other factor that stands out is the responsibility in EU affairs. MPs with clearer attribution of responsibility – due to their membership of institutions such as national parliaments, governing parties, or EU committees – communicate EU affairs more often. The problem is that it is often difficult, more difficult than it is in regional or national affairs, to attribute responsibility in EU affairs for both MPs and their constituents.

These results support the theoretical arguments that: (1) MPs choose what they communicate to voters strategically; and (2) salience and complexity of political affairs might affect the way individual MPs settle their strategy. Politically, this implies that Euroscepticism might be dominating the parliamentary communication of EU affairs. European citizens receive disproportionately negative views of the EU from their parliamentary representatives. This implication rests on the assumption that MPs from Eurosceptic parties tally with the party line. Further research could test this assumption by analysing the positions that MPs take in EU affairs.

Finally, this study provides evidence from only two EU member states and one communication channel. The parliaments in Ireland and the UK are similar in many aspects, contributing to the internal and external validity of the results presented here. Furthermore, Twitter is a suitable choice as well because it is an increasingly popular communication channel where we can observe strategic choices of individual MPs. However, there are several other channels of communication available to MPs in different member states. Do the results presented in this paper hold in other member states or communication channels as well? Further research could broaden our understanding beyond these limits.

## Notes

1. A detailed codebook for these variables can be found in the appendix.
2. Twitter's API returns up to 3200 of the most recent tweets of a user. Not to lose any tweets of very active MPs who could go beyond this limit in four months, I collected the data in two instalments, on 1 December 2014 and 1 February 2015.
3. Note that this method analyses only the text internal to the tweets themselves, and excludes any URLs that might be attached to link the reader to an external source.
4. A large majority of the dormant 27 accounts had not had a tweet for years, indicating that these MPs stopped using Twitter. Hence I excluded them from the analysis (for the same practice, see Jackson & Lilleker, 2011).
5. For the complete list of keywords in each category, see Table A1 in the appendix.
6. Indeed, likelihood ratio tests between the Poisson regression and the negative binomial regression show that the latter is the more appropriate model for the data under analysis ( $LR \chi^2 = 4236.09$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $Pr > LR \chi^2 = 0.0000$ ). Likewise,

Vuong tests suggest that the zero-inflated negative binomial models would not be an improvement over the standard negative binomial models used here ( $z = -0.01$ ,  $Pr > z = 0.5029$ ). Both results are based on Model 2.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

**Resul Umit** is a PhD candidate at the Vienna Institute for Advanced Studies. His research focuses primarily on legislative behaviour, electoral studies, and European integration. His doctoral work analyses the communication between members of parliament and their constituents. Email: [umit@ihs.ac.at](mailto:umit@ihs.ac.at)

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## Appendix

### Dictionary of EU keywords and its validity

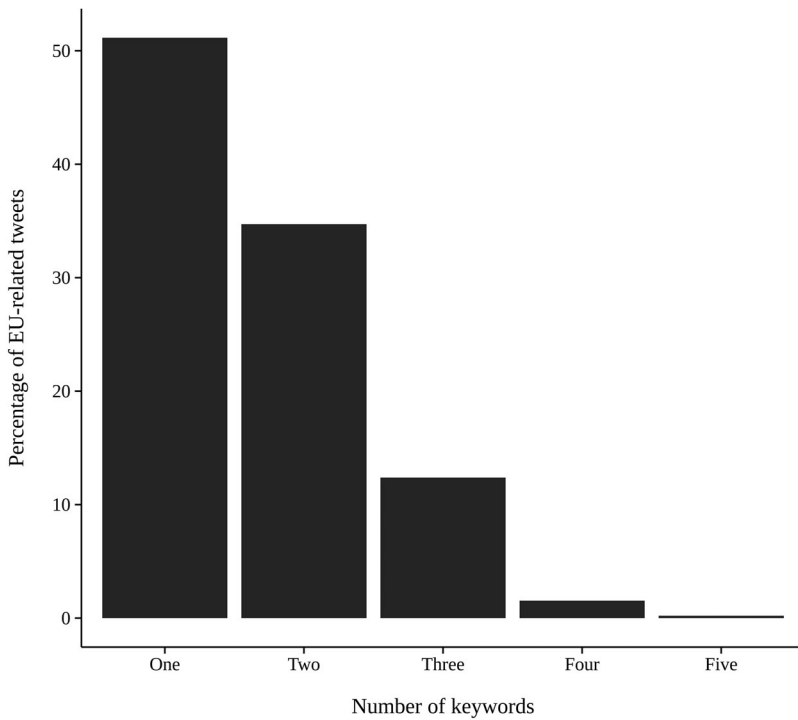
Table A1 presents the dictionary of EU keywords used as a first step for locating the EU-related tweets. I took several aspects into account while putting keywords together to increase the validity of the dictionary and the methods used in this analysis in general. First, for the draft dictionary, I benefited from a comprehensive glossary provided by a website dedicated to EU terminology, [www.euabc.com](http://www.euabc.com).

**Table A1.** Dictionary of EU keywords.

Country-specific	People	Institutions	Policy
£1.7	@EP_President	Brussels	Accession
Bailout	@FedericaMog	Codecision	Acquis
Brexit	@philhoganeu	Comitology	Banking union
France	Ashton	Committee of the Regions	CAP
Germany	Barroso	COREPER	CFSP
Greece	Commissioner Director-General	Court of Auditors	Citizens' initiative
Greek	Draghi	Democratic deficit	Cohesion
Grexit	EUHR	DG	CSDP
In/Out	High Representative	Directorate-General	Customs union
Member state	Hogan	Double majority	Derogation
Referendum	Hollande	Early warning system	Directive
Syriza	@jhilleu	EC	EAW
	Jonathan Hill	ECB	EMU
	Juncker	ECJ	Enlargement
	MEP	ECOFIN	ESM
	Merkel	EP	Fiscal
	Mogherini	EU	Fisheries
	Rapporteur	EUCO	Free movement
	Schulz	EWM	Harmonisation
	Tusk	EWS	Immigration
	Van Rompuy	Intergovernmental	Laeken
		QMV	Lisbon
		Qualified majority voting	Luxembourg compromise
		Ratification	Maastricht
		Strasbourg	Monetary union
		Unanimity	OLAF
		Yellow card	Regional development
			Regulation
			Schengen
			Single market
			Stability
			Subsidiarity
			Supranational
			TEC
			TEU
			TFEU
			Treaties
			Treaty
			TTIP

Note: The keyword EU was used both as a standalone acronym, i.e. *EU*, and as a group of letters, i.e. *eu*.

I continued to update the dictionary as I learnt from the data while manually reading the tweets. As Figure A1 shows, almost half of the EU-related tweets included more than one keyword. Therefore, the data itself was an important guide for the final version of the dictionary. Last but not the least, I also searched



**Figure A1.** Number of keywords in EU-related tweets.

the database for any tweet that included the letters *e* and *u* together in addition to the obvious keyword *EU*. These precautions to put together a valid dictionary seem to have worked well. As it is mentioned in the main text, a manual coding of a random sample of 2352 tweets that the dictionary did not catch found only five further EU-related tweets.

### *Intersubjective replicability (inter-coder reliability)*

Content analysis methods require reliability tests, especially where there is more than one coder working on the same data. Although I was the sole coder of the data, I followed this scientific practice to test for intersubjective replicability, that is, to see whether my decisions in the manual coding phase were objective enough. For this task, I randomly chose 500 messages (2.1 per cent) among the manually coded tweets, and asked a second researcher to code these tweets based on the following codebook. The second coder was a PhD candidate with research interests in EU politics and experience in content analysis. The training – which included explanations of the overall project, coding instructions for tweets, and the dictionary – was very brief and lasted less than 30 minutes.

The results were higher than acceptable standards in various tests. Table A2 presents the coding decisions. Out of 500 cases, there were only 19 disagreements between the coders, which results in 96.2 per cent agreement. This equals 0.92 as *Scott's Pi*, *Cohens Kappa*, or *Krippendorff's Alpha* (nominal).

**Table A2.** Coding decisions.

Coder 1	Coder 2		
	Yes	No	Total
Yes	182	13	195
No	6	299	305
Total	188	312	500

Because the disagreements did not point to systematic inconsistencies, I used the original coding for the statistical analysis presented in the main text.

## **The codebook of variables**

### **Dependent variable**

*EU-related Tweets* is a count variable, indicating the number of EU-related messages that MPs posted on Twitter between 1 October 2014 and 31 January 2015. First, to decide whether a tweet was EU-related (coded as 1) or not (coded as 0), the instructions below were followed. Second, for each MP, the scores from their individual tweets were counted to create the dependent variable.

#### *Coding instructions for tweets*

The messages you are about to code are from a sample of tweets posted by regional and national members of parliaments from Ireland and the United Kingdom between 1 October 2014 and 31 January 2015. These tweets are sampled because they contain one or more of the keywords in [Table A1](#).

Code only the text internal to the tweets themselves, and ignore the URLs that might be present in the tweets to link the reader to an external source.

Code a message as 1 if:

1. it is about a person in their capacity as an EU official.

Example: I think Barroso tried to rule out budget freeze.  
and/or

2. it is about EU institutions.

Example: ECB may make weaker states bear more QE risks.  
and/or

3. it is about EU policies.

Example: Today's immigration figures prove why we should remove free movement of labour and replace with proper controlled visa system.

Code all the other messages as 0.

### **Independent variables**

#### *Electoral Safety*

An ordinal variable measuring the safety of parliamentary seats for legislators, coded as 0 for *Marginal*, as 1 for *Competitive*, or as 2 for *Safe* seats, after ranking and dividing the seats into three in each parliament (for single-member districts)

or in each district (for multi-member districts) according to the results from the most recent elections: 2010 for the House of Commons and 2011 for the rest of the parliaments, unless there was a by-election for individual cases. This three-category, ordinal coding of the election results as *Electoral Safety* is based on the coding scheme developed by Heitshusen et al. (2005).

For the seats in single-member districts (all seats in the House of Commons; constituency seats in the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales), the coding is based on the difference between the vote shares of the incumbent MP and the candidate who came second in the most recent elections. The seats are coded as *Marginal* if this difference is smaller than 10 per cent, as *Competitive* if it is between 10 and 20 per cent, and as *Safe* if it is higher than 20 per cent.

For the seats in closed-list PR districts (regional seats in the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales), the coding is based on relative list placement of incumbent MPs, i.e. whether they are at the bottom (*Marginal*), top (*Safe*), or in between (*Competitive*) the two on their elected party list.

For the seats in districts with single-transferable vote (the Dáil Éireann and Northern Ireland Assembly), the coding is based on the first-preference votes of incumbent MPs. The seats are coded as *Marginal* if their first-preference vote is less than 60 per cent of the district's quota, as *Competitive* if it is between 60 and 120 per cent, and as *Safe* if it is higher than 120 per cent.

#### *Seniority*

A continuous variable based on the number of years that MPs had served as parliamentary representatives in 2015.

#### *Eurosceptic Party*

An ordinal variable measuring the overall position of the party leadership towards European integration in 2014, coded from 1 for strongly in favour to 7 for strongly opposed. As mentioned in the text, this variable is based on the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al., 2015).

#### *Eurosceptic Challenge*

A continuous variable measuring the vote share of parliaments' most Eurosceptic party (regional seats in the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales) or their candidates (all other seats) in the most recent elections: 2010 for the House of Commons and 2011 for the rest of the parliaments, unless there was a by-election for individual cases. Based on the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al., 2015), these parties are UKIP for the regional and national parliaments in the UK and the Socialist Party (*Páirtí Sóisialach*) for the Irish Dáil Éireann. For the seats under single-transferable vote (all seats in the Northern Ireland Assembly and Dáil Éireann), this variable indicates the share of first-preference votes. For the seats not contested by these parties, this variable is coded as 0.

#### *National Parliament*

A binary variable coded as 0 for the MPs in regional parliaments or as 1 for MPs in national parliaments.

#### *Government Party*

A binary variable coded as 0 for the MPs from opposition parties or as 1 for the MPs from parties in the government at the regional level for the regional MPs or at the national level for national MPs.

#### *EU Committee*

A binary variable, coded as 0 if an MP is not a member of the committee in charge of overseeing EU affairs, or as 1 if they are. The parliaments in this study, like all the parliaments in the other EU member states, have developed institutional structures to

scrutinise EU affairs. Committees in charge of overseeing EU affairs are the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs (Dáil Éireann), European Scrutiny Committee (House of Commons), European and External Relations Committee (Scottish Parliament), Constitutional and Legislative Affairs Committee (National Assembly for Wales), and the Committee for the Office of the First and deputy First Minister (Northern Ireland Assembly).

#### *Voting System*

A categorical variable, coded as closed-list proportional representation (PR) for the regional seats in the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales; as first-past-the-post (FPTP) for all seats in the House of Commons and the constituency seats in the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales; and as single-transferable vote (STV) for the seats in the Northern Ireland Assembly and Dáil Éireann.

#### *District Magnitude*

A continuous variable measuring the number of legislative seats allocated in the district of an MP.

#### *EU Dissent*

An ordinal variable measuring the degree of disagreement on European integration in legislators' party in 2014, coded as from 0 for completely united to 10 for extremely divided parties. Again, this variable is based on the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al., 2015).

#### *Age*

A continuous variable based on the age of MPs in 2015.

#### *Female MPs*

A binary variable based on gender, coded as 0 for male MPs or as 1 for female MPs.

#### *United Kingdom*

A binary variable coded as 0 for MPs in Ireland or as 1 for MPs in the UK.