

Giving a voice to Eurosceptic MEPs in the European Parliament is an important part of making the integration process more legitimate.

Blog Admin

*While Eurosceptic parties at the national level have received significant attention from political scientists, Euroscepticism within the EU's own institutions has generally been overlooked. **Nathalie Brack** uses role theory to assess the experiences of Eurosceptic MEPs in the European Parliament, finding that they can broadly be situated into three distinct categories: absentees, public orators, and pragmatists. She argues that far from being a problem for European integration, the presence of Eurosceptic MEPs actually has the potential to increase the legitimacy of the integration process by giving a voice to public opposition.*



Euroscepticism has become an integral part of the political landscape in Europe, both at the national and supranational levels. It has attracted significant attention as European elections have provided Eurosceptic parties with an opportunity to get parliamentary representation. But if there is a rich literature on the Eurosceptic stances of these parties, there remains relatively little research on these actors and their behaviours once inside the European Parliament (EP). This article aims therefore to understand the strategies developed by Eurosceptic actors at the supranational level. It focuses on members of the Eurosceptic group [Europe of Freedom and Democracy](#) (in the 7th legislature of the EP), of its predecessor, the [Independence and Democracy group](#), as well as on Eurosceptic representatives from the radical right (6th and 7th legislatures). These actors are representatives of fringe right-wing parties, sharing an opposition to the EU and/or European integration primarily for political and cultural reasons. They are at the heart of an interesting paradox: their greatest electoral successes have occurred in elections to an institution they oppose and having taken their seats, they are obliged to operate within it, which can pose an existentialist dilemma for them.

Drawing on the motivational approach of role theory, the article demonstrates that facing similar institutional constraints, Eurosceptic MEPs can be categorised in 3 types of roles. More precisely, the qualitative analysis of the interviews with MEPs, of their parliamentary activities and of the observation of group meetings shows that these MEPs display a variety of strategies and perceptions of their European mandate that can be summarised in a typology of three roles: the Absentee, the Public Orator and the Pragmatist.

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THE FIRST IS THE ROLE OF THE ABSENTEE. IT IS characterised by two main elements: comparatively limited involvement inside the parliament and emphasis on the national arena and the voters. Although minimal involvement is not restricted solely to Eurosceptics, a lack of involvement has a specific meaning in their case and can reflect another type of representation in the EP. It can be motivated either by a lack of interest in the mandate, or by an absolute refusal to get involved in the daily functioning of the institution. While Absentees may neglect the parliament, they are very active at home. They feel they are in a permanent campaign to influence public opinion at home against the EU. If they are motivated by such ideological considerations, opportunistic and utilitarian considerations also play an important role. Some Abstentees can indeed be strongly motivated by the benefits attached to the position of MEP (immunity, income, access to the media, social prestige) while others participate in EP elections for national political considerations: i.e. to take advantage of an electoral system that is more favourable to small, marginalised parties. The seat in the EP is then an opportunity to get noticed at the national level and gain some legitimacy while not being involved in the EP. This role tends to be chosen by Eurosceptics hostile to the EU and the integration process or by “intergovernmentalist” MEPs.



The second role is the Public Orator. MEPs playing this role give priority to two aspects of the mandate: public speaking and the dissemination of negative information on the EU. Public Orators see themselves as being the only opposition speakers and their logic is to delegitimise the institution through public speeches. But Public Orators think that it is also their duty to inform the public of the decisions made by the EU and their negative consequences. They have strong relations with the media and are always available to answer questions from voters, journalists, and other actors. Their presence in the EP and its bodies is conditioned partly by the satisfaction of making plenary speeches, but also by the need to collect negative information on the EU and to know from the inside what is happening. This role tends to be chosen by either Eurosceptics hostile to the EU and the integration process, or intergovernmentalists who see the EP as a useful forum of expression.

The last role is the Pragmatist. It is characterised by greater involvement in the daily work of the EP, a need to achieve results, and a tendency to respect the rules. Such Eurosceptics do not remain in sterile opposition, but develop a different strategy, aiming to strike a balance between the promotion of their views and the pursuit of concrete results. Therefore, they develop a dual conception of their mandate: as Eurosceptics they see themselves as part of the opposition to European integration, but as MEPs they want to make a difference. Two subgroups are distinguishable: the first one includes pragmatists who conceive and carry out their mandate in order to amend and control, in specific areas, the initiatives of their fellow MEPs and of the other EU institutions. The second subgroup of pragmatists is primarily driven by the motivation to defend the national/regional interest in the chamber and solve the problems in their country/region. They tend to adopt an instrumentalist approach as they use the assembly as a forum for the advocacy of national or specific interests that they cannot defend at the national level. The role of Pragmatist is primarily chosen by reformist Eurosceptics, who accept some limited and institutionalised cooperation at the European level and concentrate their criticism on the current state of

the EU.

Euroscepticism, especially in its outright form, remains rather marginal and has not had a direct impact on policy outcomes. Euroscepticism would have to be much more widespread among elites to really have an immediate impact on the workings of the EU institutions. However this does not mean that the presence of Eurosceptics within the EP has no impact at all. Eurosceptics not only facilitate discussions about the limits of the current integration process, but also raise key questions about the role of the opposition in a political system like the EU, which relies on relatively depoliticised and consensual interactions. The presence of these dissenting voices could increase the representativeness of the EP, and contribute thereby to the legitimacy of the European polity.

For a longer discussion of this topic see: [Brack, N., "Euroscepticism at the Supranational Level: The Case of the 'Untidy Right' in the European Parliament", Journal of Common Market Studies, vol. 51\(1\) 2013, pp. 85-104](#)

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