

Italian members of parliament are paid substantially higher salaries than those in other West European countries.

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*A number of political scandals have taken place across Europe over the salaries and expenses paid to MPs in national parliaments: most notably in the UK's 'expenses scandal' in 2009. **Pablo Oñate** looks at the different levels of salary paid to MPs across several European countries. He finds that the raw salary paid to members of parliament is typically higher in Northern European countries than it is in Southern European countries, such as Spain and Portugal. When these salaries are compared with GDP per capita figures, however, most of the countries considered pay similar amounts to their representatives. Italy is the one exception, with significantly higher MP salaries than the rest of the countries in the analysis.*



Negative attitudes towards politicians, and particularly, against MPs, are now fairly widespread in most Western democracies. Politicians are perceived as belonging to a professional privileged class, who do not take care of citizens' interests and spend most of their time looking after their own affairs and those of their party. Therefore, their salary, pensions, and allowances are always a controversial issue that easily arises public indignation.

MPs are supposed to defend the public interest, and to prevent private interests from coming to dominate. Several academic contributions show that MPs now have long working days, and are obliged to spend time away from their homes and families to undertake certain responsibilities related to their job. These tasks demand high levels of specialisation and devotion on the part of MPs. Usually, they spend three or four days a week in Parliament. When they return to their constituency, they are involved again in a wide range of activities that prevent them from enjoying rest and a private-life even during weekends, on a permanent basis. Nevertheless, citizens tend to ignore this intense and professional activity. Therefore, whatever salary and allowances MPs get will always be perceived as being too high.

No doubt, MPs are better paid than the average worker in each country. When most of our countries are facing a deep financial crisis, with wage cuts and high levels of unemployment, MPs are, somehow, considered by citizens as responsible for the economic difficulties many of them face in their everyday life. Therefore, their salary is generally considered too high, whatever level it raises. MPs are usually paid in accordance with being considered high dignitaries, with a status similar to that of high ranking civil servants.

Table: MPs' monthly salaries and overnight accommodation expenses in European countries (euros)

| | <u>Italy</u> | <u>Germany</u> | <u>France</u> | <u>Sweden</u> | <u>UK</u> | <u>Spain</u> | <u>Portugal</u> |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|-----------|--------------|-----------------|
| Monthly salary | 11,703 | 7,700 | 6,935 | 6,721 | 6,430 | 3,670 | 3,260 |
| Overnight expenses | 4,003 | 4,100 | 165 | 927 | 2,000 | 950 | 1,100 |
| Ratio of salary to GDP per capita | 5.52 | 2.89 | 2.72 | 1.90 | 2.60 | 1.96 | 2.52 |

Note: All figures are expressed in euros, before taxes. German overnight expenses include accommodation and other costs. Certain figures are averages and may vary between MPs.

The salary may also increase if MPs have specific parliamentary roles/positions.

Source: World Bank and parliamentary websites.

As shown in the Table, MPs' salaries vary between European countries. Northern European countries, such as France, Germany, Sweden, and the UK, have fairly similar MP salary structures. These salaries are higher than those in Southern European countries such as Spain, and Portugal, with the exception of Italy, which has much higher salaries than any of the European countries considered.

However, the differences in salary between Northern European and Southern European parliaments are reduced significantly when MPs' salaries are compared with each country's GDP per capita. All of the countries considered have fairly similar salary levels for MPs when considered in this way. The exception is, again, Italy, which has a substantially higher rate than any of the other European countries in the table. Nevertheless, differences do appear when other allowances are considered, such as the expenses for overnight accommodation, renting of office space, the amount granted to MPs to hire assistants and other staff members, along with other expenses which vary from country to country.

Regardless, it is up to us, as citizens, to consider whether we want our elected representatives to be paid accordingly to the tasks and responsibilities we expect them to carry out. Chief among these is to insure that they defend the public interest against narrow private interests which threaten to put citizens at a disadvantage. Whether they fulfil the job correctly or not is a different matter. We still have an easy way at hand to dismiss them if we consider they don't meet their obligations: the ballot box.



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