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# Democratic accountability regimes, populism, and transparency in the European Parliament

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**ABSTRACT**
This study examines how national democratic accountability regimes and populism influence transparency supplied and demanded in the European Parliament. The study builds on research on legislative transparency, democratic accountability and populism, and is based on an analysis of the activity of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) during the 9th European Parliament term. It shows that MEPs from countries with strong accountability regimes supply and demand more transparency, and that MEPs from populist parties supply less transparency but demand more than those from mainstream parties. The study also shows that MEPs from mainstream and populist parties coming from countries with weak democratic accountability do not differ in their supply and demand for transparency. However, when they come from countries with strong accountability regimes, MEPs from mainstream parties supply more transparency, while MEPs from populist parties demand more transparency. The study makes contributions to research on EU transparency and populism in Europe, and has relevant implications in terms of EU democratic quality.

## Introduction

This study examines how national democratic accountability regimes and populism influence transparency supplied and demanded in the European Parliament (EP). Transparency is generally conceived as a relational action consisting of the provision of information about public organisations,

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enabling external actors to access information about their performance (Cucciniello et al., 2016) and about policy contents, policy outcomes and decision-making processes (Grimmelikhuijsen & Welch, 2012; Heald, 2006). Transparency is an integral component of democratic quality, as it is intended to reinforce democratic accountability (Brandsma & Schillemans, 2013) and legitimacy (Meijer, 2013), mitigate corruption (Brusca et al., 2018; Lindstedt & Naurin, 2010), improve governance (Hood, 2006), and strengthen citizens' trust in democratic institutions (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013) and their participation in political life (Harrison & Sayogo, 2014). At the EU level, transparency is frequently claimed to enhance EU legitimacy and is consistent with the principle of open decision-making, which is institutionalised in the Lisbon Treaty (Brandsma, 2019).

Existing research on EU transparency has often highlighted the limitations of transparency and attributed them to the widely invoked transparency-efficiency trade-off argument (e.g., Brandsma, 2019; Novak & Hillebrandt, 2020). Yet, there is a lack of scholarly attention to whether and how national democratic accountability regimes and party populism influence legislators' transparency. These two factors are in tension as the former has the potential to strengthen democratic quality while the latter has the potential to weaken it. In this respect, the rise of populist parties in Europe, and particularly their increasing representation in the EP, raises concerns about the EU's democratic quality and its capacity to enhance transparency. As most scholars argue, populism challenges liberal democracy (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012), weakening democratic institutional safeguards (Juon & Bochsler, 2020) and transparency institutions (Michener, 2023). Moreover, comparative studies suggest that populists operate differently depending on the democratic quality of their countries (Gherghina and Mitru 2024; Mauk, 2020). Despite the uncertain implications of this apparent tension for democratic quality, the question of how the interplay between national democratic accountability regimes and populism influences transparency at the EU level has been overlooked. This study aims to fill this gap with the objective of understanding better how these opposing dynamics affect transparency practices in the EP.

Furthermore, prior research has examined the supply and demand of transparency at the EU level separately, overlooking that similar dynamics may have distinct impacts on each dimension. This body of literature has addressed the design of transparency regimes at the EU level and its normative implications (Héritier, 2003; Rasmussen, 2015), transparency in trilogues and policy-making (Brandsma, 2019; Curtin & Leino, 2017), in inter-institutional negotiations (Broniecki, 2020), at the Council level (Novak & Hillebrandt, 2020), and in relation to MEPs' interactions with interest representatives (Bunea, 2018; Font & Pérez-Durán, 2023). Similarly, prior research has investigated the EP exercise of its oversight functions through mechanisms aimed at asking EU executive actors for information on issues

falling under their responsibility (Font & Pérez-Durán, 2016; Guinaudeau & Costa, 2022; Jensen et al., 2013), also taking transparency into account (Akbik & Migliorati, 2024). By studying both sides of transparency, this study adopts a more comprehensive approach. We pose the following questions: under what conditions do MEPs supply transparency when performing policy-making functions and demand transparency from EU executive actors when performing supervisory ones? More specifically, when coming from countries with strong democratic accountability regimes, do MEPs from populist parties behave as transparently as those from mainstream parties? Furthermore, do they demand a similar degree of transparency compared to mainstream parliamentarians?

The study builds on previous research on legislative transparency (e.g., Font & Pérez-Durán, 2023; Novak & Hillebrandt, 2020), democratic accountability (e.g., Bovens, 2007; Lindberg, 2013; Lührmann et al., 2020) and populism (e.g., Gherghina & Mitru, 2024; Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018; Krause, 2020; Mudde, 2007; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017; Van Kessel et al., 2020). Empirically, it is based on data on MEPs' reporting of meetings with interest representatives and on parliamentary questions during the 9th EP term. Regarding transparency supplied, we focus on MEPs' reporting of meetings with interest representatives, as these interactions have been a key concern in recent EU transparency initiatives (Bunea, 2018; Font & Pérez-Durán, 2023). These concerns have intensified in the aftermath of the so-called Qatargate corruption scandal disclosed in December 2022. The scandal involved MEPs – including one EP vice-president – and was linked to the interference of third countries, namely Qatar and Morocco. In response to the crisis, the EP adopted reforms aiming at enhancing transparency and other ethical standards. While EU lobby research has extensively examined the nature and drivers of interactions between policy-makers and stakeholders (e.g., Bunea, 2019; Rasmussen, 2015), few studies have explored these interactions from the perspective of transparency (e.g., Bunea, 2018; Font & Pérez-Durán, 2023).

Regarding transparency demanded, we use parliamentary questions as MEPs extensively exercise their supervision of EU executive actors through them (e.g., Akbik & Migliorati, 2024; Guinaudeau & Costa, 2022; Jensen et al., 2013). Recent studies on questions in the EP categorise them according to the three stages of accountability relationships outlined by Bovens (2007): requesting information, demanding justification, and demanding rectification (Akbik & Migliorati, 2024; Maricut-Akbik, 2021). Within this classification, information questions are assumed to concern government transparency, covering policy, procedural, and political transparency (Akbik & Migliorati, 2024). While our study engages with this research, it specifically focuses on questions demanding transparency – rather than requesting information – and calling for greater openness in how EU executive actors make decisions.

We show that MEPs from both mainstream and populist parties coming from countries with weak democratic accountability supply and demand low levels of transparency. However, when MEPs come from countries with higher levels of democratic accountability, mainstream and populist parties differ in the supply and demand for transparency. Regarding transparency supplied, we argue that MEPs from countries with strong democratic accountability regimes behave more transparently when they are members of mainstream parties, compared to those from populist parties. Regarding transparency demanded, we argue that MEPs from countries with strong democratic accountability regimes demand more transparency from EU executive actors when they are members of populist parties, compared to those from mainstream parties. This suggests that while strong national accountability regimes provide opportunities and expectations allowing MEPs to socialise into transparency norms, mainstream and populist parties approach transparency differently. Combined, our results suggest that regimes displaying high standards of democratic accountability provide fertile ground for populists to portray themselves as the 'moral' defenders of integrity to criticise EU political elites while bypassing transparency rules when it comes to their own activities.

Our findings make two main contributions. First, the study advances EU transparency research, providing a comprehensive understanding of how transparency translates into practice when the EP performs policy-making and oversight functions. Second, the study contributes to research on populism in Europe by intersecting theoretical arguments on national democratic regimes and populism, and surveying their combined effects on transparency supplied and demanded. Ultimately, by bridging literatures on transparency, democratic accountability and populism, it provides novel insights into the tension between democratic accountability and the potential weakening effects of populism in Europe.

## Transparency and democratic accountability

Generally, the notion of transparency refers to a relational action involving information providers and information recipients (Meijer, 2013). Transparency allows stakeholders and the general public to access information about an organisation's activities. Recent work on transparency distinguishes between three main dimensions of government transparency on decision-making, policy content, and policy outcomes (Grimmelikhuijsen & Welch, 2012; Heald, 2006). Transparency in decision-making refers to the disclosing of information about decision-making processes, whereas transparency in policy content and policy outcome refers to the substance of policies. In this study, transparency primarily connects with the notion of transparency in decision-making, as it refers to the openness of decision-making.

This study conceives transparency, understood as the provision of information, as a key component of democratic accountability (Bovens, 2007), and approaches transparency-related practice by combining a perspective of the EP acting both as an actor and as a forum. Following Bovens (2007), accountability is understood as 'a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgment, and the actor may face consequences' (Bovens, 2007, p. 450). In our study, this accountability framework provides conceptual lenses to the study of transparency supplied and demanded in the EP. By combining an analysis of transparency taking the EP as an actor and as a forum, we investigate two different accountability relationships: one providing information to the public and other forums about the EP activity, and in particular on MEPs' interactions with interest representatives, and another in which the EP requests EU executive actors, particularly the European Commission, to behave transparently. While the supply and demand of information do not complete accountability relations, the study of transparency by conceiving the EP as an actor and as a forum provides two core and complementary dimensions of democratic accountability.

## Theoretical framework

We develop arguments on the effects of democratic accountability regimes and party populism on transparency supplied and demanded. The theoretical arguments and the hypotheses derived are elaborated in what follows.

### *Democratic accountability regimes*

Previous research shows that transparent behaviour can stem from written or unwritten rules influenced by national socio-political factors and culture (Kaufmann et al., 2018; Meijer, 2013). In some traditions, long-established practices that promote public access to information and transparency are considered instruments to hold governments accountable, whereas in other traditions, government secrecy and public corruption are tolerated (Ogus, 2004). At the EU level, recent work shows that MEPs are more likely to behave transparently when they come from countries with strong regimes fighting against corruption (Font & Pérez-Durán, 2023). It is argued that the national corruption-mitigation tradition in which MEPs were socialised is related to how they behave in terms of transparency. Building on these ideas, we propose an argument focused on national democratic accountability to provide a more fine-tuned explanation for transparency supplied and demanded. While control of corruption is concerned with preventing the misuse of public resources for private gains,

accountability focuses on the relationships between account givers and account-holders. The former provides information and justification for their actions and decisions, while the latter evaluates them and may impose sanctions for misconduct or poor performance (Bovens, 2007). The relationship between account givers and account holders may take several forms depending on the spatial direction between actors (Lührmann et al., 2020). Vertical accountability involves legislative or executive bodies and citizens, horizontal accountability involves different branches of government, and diagonal accountability involves external forums and politicians (Lindberg, 2013; Lührmann et al., 2020). As strong accountability regimes involve multiple actors in different types of interactions, they facilitate the socialisation of norms by which politicians and public authorities are subject to multiple checks and display information on their activity. In weaker accountability regimes, these actors may have comparatively less familiarity with institutional checks.

That said, some considerations are needed. First, while democratic accountability is inherent in strong liberal democracies, focusing on accountability regimes allows us to move beyond broad democratic principles and examine how strong accountability regimes at home lead MEPs to behave transparently and claim transparency to EU executive actors. Second, it is plausible that the effects of democratic accountability on transparency, both supplied and demanded, may be influenced by other unobserved country characteristics, such as economic development or specific domestic regulations, which could be associated with both accountability and transparency outcomes. However, we focus on accountability regimes as they encompass rules on information provision (Bovens, 2007) and offer a key framework for understanding how transparency practices are implemented.

In addition, recent research has highlighted the costs of organizing accountability procedures and disclosing public information (Bauhr & Grimes, 2017). These processes require strong institutional capacities, meaning that less professionalised institutions may face difficulties that constrain transparency regardless of the accountability norms. While capacities are important, we assume that the notion of accountability regime goes beyond resource availability (Bauhr & Grimes, 2017), as it also encompasses institutional norms and cultural expectations. In strong accountability regimes, politicians are likely to perform transparently and expect to be scrutinised to justify their decisions. Turning to the EP, national accountability regimes in which MEPs were socialised are expected to translate into how they behave in terms of supplying and demanding transparency. Those from countries with strong accountability traditions are more likely to care for transparency both as policy-makers and as scrutinisers of EU executive bodies.

H1a. MEPs from countries with strong democratic accountability standards behave more transparently

H1b. MEPs from countries with strong democratic accountability standards demand more transparency from EU executive actors

## *Populism*

To develop our arguments on the effect of populism on transparency supplied and demanded, we take an ideational approach to populism. This approach embraces different conceptualisations of populism: a thin-centred ideology conceiving society as divided into the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite' (Mudde, 2007); a set of ideas confronting the 'corrupt elite' with the 'virtuous people' (Rooduijn, 2019); a unique set of ideas conceiving politics as a struggle between the people and the elite (Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2022); and a discursive frame with us-versus-them messages (Schmidt, 2023). Overall, these conceptualisations capture the core attributes of populism: anti-elitism, people-centrism, moral integrity and Manichaeism (Böhmelt et al., 2022; Mudde, 2007; Pirro & Stanley, 2022).

Building on these ideas, we elaborate arguments on the impact of populist parties on transparency supplied and demanded in the EP. We first take a broader perspective on the relationships between populism and core aspects of democratic governance. Some scholars have noted that populist parties are strongly supportive of instruments of direct democracy (Jacobs et al., 2018) to strengthen the power of the people (Mudde, 2007) and scrutinise political elites. However, support for referendums is not a defining feature of the populist ideational approach (Meijers & Zaslove, 2021). Recent findings reveal that populist parties pay less attention than mainstream parties to referendums (Gherghina & Pilet, 2021) as they promote these instruments of direct democracy to support leaders in a plebiscitarian logic (Gherghina & Pilet, 2021). Similarly, populist parties place less emphasis on deliberation in their electoral manifestos compared to mainstream parties (Gherghina & Mitru, 2024).

Populists' instrumental approach to democratic governance may also apply to transparency. A central argument is that transparency is constitutive of institutional politics and is mediated by elites, which is at odds with anti-elitism, a core component of populism (Michener, 2023). Because of anti-elitism and anti-institutional traits, populists try to weaken transparency institutions via noncompliance (Michener, 2023), negatively affecting state transparency (Juon & Bochsler, 2020). Likewise, populists' anti-elitism incentivises their leaders to withhold or misreport information to international organisations (Carnegie et al., 2024). In this regard, the notion of populist transparency, as opposed to technocratic transparency, reflects that populists tend to hide evidence about themselves and avoid any public scrutiny (Fenster, 2017).

Yet, the relationship between populism and transparency at the EP level is not straightforward. A recent study on transparency in the EP found no significant association between populist parties and transparent behaviour (Font & Pérez-Durán, 2023), suggesting that populist rhetoric might not always translate into clear differences in the provision of transparency. Still, we have reasons to argue that populism reduces transparency supplied. First, the cited study focuses on the first two years of the 9th legislature, a period during which MEPs had limited time to adapt to the rules on transparency the EP adopted in 2019. Second, we base our expectations on broader patterns of populists, which tend to erode transparency norms (Juon & Bochsler, 2020; Michener, 2023). Regarding the demand side, one could assume that populists' disregard for transparency norms would be accompanied by a limited interest in demanding transparency. However, due to anti-elitism, they are incentivised to use transparency demand instrumentally in an attempt to delegitimise EU political elites.

A further concern about examining the effect of populism on transparency is whether parties adopt populist rhetoric to advance their core ideologies. As far-right and far-left parties tend to employ a populist discourse (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017), there is a need to disentangle ideology and populism (Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018). As far-right parties emphasise nativism (Mudde, 2007) and mistrust supranationalism (Van Kessel et al., 2020) and external influence (Krause, 2020), they could claim greater transparency to EU institutional actors to delegitimise the EU and protect national sovereignty from dangerous others (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017). As far-left parties focus on social equality (Krause, 2020) and decry globalisation (Schmidt, 2023), they could claim transparency to EU institutional actors as a way to challenge EU power structures. Albeit with different motivations, populists from the far-right and the far-left are likely to call for greater transparency as a way to criticise EU executive actors. Moreover, irrespective of their host ideologies, as populists claim themselves as the true representatives of the general will, they are likely to reject oversight of their own activity (Huber & Schimpf, 2017, Mudde and Kaltwaser 2012), which, in their view, constrain popular sovereignty. This is likely to result in lower transparency supplied.

> H2a. MEPs from populist parties behave less transparently than MEPs from mainstream parties

> H2b. MEPs from populist parties demand more transparency from EU executive actors than MEPs from mainstream parties

Moreover, we expect that accountability regimes affect MEPs' transparency-related practices differently depending on whether they are members of populist parties or not. Our expectation connects with debates on the relationship between populism and liberal democracy (Mudde & Kaltwasser,

2017; Rooduijn, 2019). For instance, a recent study shows that democratic quality mitigates the effects of populist party success on political trust (Mauk, 2020). We build arguments on the combined effect of democratic accountability and populism on transparency, as these two factors are intrinsically in tension. For MEPs from countries with weak democratic accountability, we expect no differences between populists and mainstream parties in their supply and demand for transparency. However, we expect that MEPs from countries with strong democratic accountability differ substantially in their supply and demand of transparency depending on whether they are members of populist or mainstream parties.

Regarding transparency supplied, we expect that MEPs from countries with weak accountability regimes overlook compliance with transparency rules, with no substantial difference between populists and non-populists. While mainstream parties tend to be more committed to democratic values than populist parties, they may find little value in performing transparently in countries with weaker accountability regimes and limited external pressure to disclose information. In addition, as populist parties are often in national government in those countries, mainstream parties might perceive openness, for instance about internal dissent, as strategically disadvantageous. Hence, MEPs with a national background of weak democratic accountability may reproduce untransparent behaviour in the EP. By contrast, when socialised in countries with strong accountability relations, mainstream parties, unlike populists, have incentives to comply with EU transparency rules as a way to adhere to democratic values and increase their legitimacy.

Regarding transparency demanded, we do not expect to find variation between populist and non-populist MEPs from countries with weak accountability regimes, as they have backgrounds in contexts with seemingly less demanding accountability mechanisms. While in principle populists could use transparency demands to criticise EU institutions, they are unlikely to demand greater transparency in low-accountability regimes, as they may not expect to benefit domestically. However, the effect of strong accountability regimes on transparency demanded is expected to vary between populists and mainstream parties. As populists accuse mainstream parties of not being accountable to the people, they might take advantage of having socialised in accountability norms to reinforce their anti-elite rhetoric and instrumentally demand transparency from EU executive actors, expecting to benefit domestically. We expect that populism affects transparency supplied and demanded at higher levels of democratic accountability.

> H3a. MEPs from countries with strong democratic accountability standards behave less transparently when they are members of populist parties, compared to MEPs from mainstream parties

H3b. MEPs from countries with strong democratic accountability standards demand more transparency from EU executive actors when they are members of populist parties, compared to MEPs from mainstream parties

## Data and methods

This study is based on an original dataset merging data from MEPs' reporting on their meetings with interest representatives and data on parliamentary questions making claims on transparency. We take MEPs as the unit of analysis. We use reported meetings and questions to operationalise transparency supplied and transparency demanded, respectively. For transparency supplied, we consider that MEPs reporting on their contacts with interest organisations is one of the most critical transparency concerns in the 9th legislature. At the start of EP9, the EP Rules of Procedure established that 'Members *should* publish online all scheduled meetings with interest representatives falling under the scope of the Transparency Register.' Following the Qatargate crisis, the revised Code of Conduct of MEPs regarding integrity and transparency, which entered into force in November 2023, established that Members *shall* publish online all scheduled meetings relating to parliamentary business with interest representatives and with representatives of public authorities of third countries (italics, ours). While there are other transparency measures to be implemented individually, such as the publication of MEPs' CV or Declarations of private interests or conflicts of interests, focusing on the reporting of meetings with interest representatives over the course of the legislature reflects a more demanding and continuous commitment with transparency than, for instance, publishing a declaration of private interests. By reporting on meetings with external organisations, MEPs make transparent who they interact with and are potentially influenced by when performing legislative activity on a day-to-day basis.

To operationalise our first dependent variable, transparency supplied, we counted the number of meetings reported by each MEP from the start of EP9 to near the end of the term (February 2024), taking the data from the EP's official website. In descriptive terms, 83% of MEPs reported at least one meeting. This reflects that publishing meetings with interest representatives has become a normalised practice among legislators. Given that most MEPs report meetings, we consider that operationalising the dependent variable as a binary variable would less accurately capture the transparency supplied and is less suitable than using the count of published meetings. Here a caveat is needed, as reporting a low number of meetings does not straightforwardly involve being less transparent. However, there are reasons to believe that the count of meetings is an adequate indicator of transparency. First, the percentage of MEPs that at the end of the legislative term had published meetings considerably increased, moving from 53% during the first two years of the

legislature (Font & Pérez-Durán, 2023) to 83% toward the end of the term. While the number of meetings reported during the second half term has increased by 60%, we have no reasons to believe that the number of meetings held during the same period has increased in such a proportion. Second, while previous survey work reveals that less than 1% of MEPs had no meetings with lobbies (Whitaker et al., 2016), our data shows that 17% did not report any meeting, reflecting a discrepancy between holding meetings and reporting meetings. Finally, as the decision to report meetings rests with MEPs, we assume that those reporting more are more willing to publish who they meet with and are therefore more committed with transparency. While using the count of meetings reported does not necessarily capture every contact (see below), it allows to gauge reasonably well MEPs' willingness to provide information to the public. In descriptive terms, we find strong variation as regards the number of meetings published by MEPs, ranging from 0 to 989 during the period covered by the study (mean = 86, SD = 125). For those standing for the full period, the number of meetings published is slightly higher (mean = 92, SD = 131).

That said, as the actual number of meetings is unknown, using exclusively the count of meetings may raise some concerns about the validity of the measure. Some plausible concerns with this measure may be that MEPs from large Western European countries have more meetings than their counterparts from Central and Eastern Europe, the disproportional allocation of rapporteurships to centrist groups and their resulting relevance for interest organisations, and the potentially lower frequency of meetings of MEPs from populist parties. To validate our measure of transparency supplied and ensure unbiased findings, we perform robustness checks using three alternative operationalisations. First, a binary variable indicating whether MEPs published meetings allows to assess the potential disproportionality in meeting frequency. Second, a binary variable indicating whether MEPs report an implausibly small number of meetings ($\leq$Q1) captures underreporting. Finally, we construct an additive index encompassing seven transparency-related activities reportable on the EP website (see Appendix 1).

For our second dependent variable, transparency demanded, we use parliamentary questions as they are key instruments of accountability and legislative oversight (Font & Pérez-Durán, 2016; Guinaudeau & Costa, 2022). Parliamentary questions serve as a strategical instrument for MEPs to highlight certain issues within an institutional context that imposes them strong institutional constrains (Sorace, 2018). We downloaded all written and oral questions asked during the period of study. Most of them were addressed to the Commission (90%), with the remaining ones being addressed to the Council, the President of the European Council, and the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. We coded those containing the

keyword transparency (and derivatives) in the tittle and/or text. We assume that when MEPs mention transparency, they emphasise its importance as a central issue in their question, either highlighting the need to provide, ensure or improve transparency, or questioning the lack of it. After checking for false positives, we counted the number of related questions asked by each MEP, taking into account that a question may be asked by more than one MEP. 4.3% of the questions demanded transparency, and 71% of MEPs asked at least one, with an average of three transparency-related questions per MEP (see Appendix 2 for examples of questions).

As MEPs may claim transparency without explicitly mentioning it, we performed robustness checks taking an alternative operationalisation based on the implementation of a Bidirectional Encoder Representations for Transformer (BERT) approach. BERT is an advanced text analysis technique based on a machine learning model that understands the context of words in text by analysing them bidirectionally. It is frequently used to analyse large amounts of textual data. We manually coded a randomly selected sample of 1,000 questions to train the model. The model's predictions achieved an accuracy of 0.97 and an F1 score of 0.86 (see Appendix 3 for details and metrics). The alternative dependent variable is the count of questions predicted as claiming transparency. The score strongly correlates with our measure based on the transparency keyword, with a Pearson's $r = 0.90$, $p < 0.001$.

To provide a wider description of how MEPs behave regarding transparency supplied and demanded, we performed a cross-tabulation of our dependent variables, once transformed into binary ones (see Table 1). The majority of MEPs, that is 60%, provide and demand transparency, whereas only 6% do not perform any of the two types of activities. Besides, 11% of MEPs ask questions concerning transparency without publishing their meetings and 23% of MEPs report about their meetings but do not ask questions.

Regarding the distribution of transparency-related activities by countries, MEPs from Northern European countries tend to prioritise transparency supplied, those from Southern European countries tend to emphasise transparency demanded, and those from Central and Eastern Europe generally score low in both types of practice (see Appendix 4). Concerning European Political Groups, MEPs from The Greens/EFA are those behaving more

**Table 1.** Transparency supplied/demanded (%).

|  | Asking questions on transparency | Not asking questions on transparency | Total |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Publishing meetings | 60 | 23 | 83 |
| Not publishing meetings | 11 | 6 | 17 |
| Total | 71 | 29 | 100 |

transparently, whereas those from Identity and Democracy and The Left (GUE/NGL) are the ones demanding more transparency (see Appendix 5).

The independent variables are operationalised as follows. For democratic accountability regime, we use the accountability index provided by the V-Dem dataset v.14 for 2023 (Coppedge et al., 2024). The index (v2x_account-ability) is an aggregate measure that combines scores on vertical, horizontal and diagonal accountability. The scores for EU countries range from .45 to 2 in a 0–2 scale, where lower and higher scores indicate lower or higher quality of democratic accountability, respectively. We perform several robustness checks with alternative measures. As the levels of accountability may change rapidly, we take the mean score of a five-year period (2019-2023), matching the EP term as much as possible. As different dimensions of accountability might have an effect on either the supply or demand of trans-parency, we also take V-Dem data to check whether diagonal accountability increases transparency supplied, and whether horizontal accountability increases transparency demanded. In addition, as previous research shows the relationship between control of corruption and transparency in the EP (Font & Pérez-Durán, 2023), we perform the analysis taking the World Bank's Control of Corruption Index (World Bank, 2024) as an alternative. For additional validation, we also take the V-Dem liberal democracy index.

For populist party, we employ the widely used PopuList dataset (Rooduijn et al., 2023), taking the scores for 2022. For parties not included in PopuList due to party splits or subnational organisations, we take the value of the orig-inal party or the national party, respectively. For independent MEPs pre-viously members of a party, we take the value of the party. Six percent of the MEPs were excluded from the analysis due to a lack of prior party affilia-tion or because their party could not be coded. Robustness checks with adjustments to the PopuList categories (e.g., Gherghina & Mitru, 2024) were also performed. Here a caveat is needed as regards the relationship between populist party and reporting meetings. Previous work surveying interest groups' interactions with parties in five small European countries suggests that they hold fewer interactions with populist parties (Berkhout et al., 2021). However, we have reasons to believe that MEPs from populist parties have held meetings with interest representatives during EP9. First, according to our data, 86% of MEPs from populist parties have authored reports as rapporteurs and/or as shadow rapporteurs during the 9th term. As drafting reports requires extensive consultation, it is reasonable to assume that MEPs from populist parties have contacts with interest represen-tatives and experts, as part of the usual policymaking practices. Second, MEPs from populist parties during EP9 have been in national government in a similar proportion to those from mainstream parties, that is, 61% and 60%, respectively. Their involvement in mainstream politics suggests that their behaviour regarding meeting with interest representatives should not be

markedly different. If minimal variation can be found regarding authoring reports and holding national government, it is reasonable to expect, as hypothesised, that MEPs from populist parties report fewer meetings resulting from a lower inclination to perform transparently. We perform robustness checks using radical right parties as an alternative to populism to check whether transparency supplied and demanded is better explained by radical right ideology than by populism. We also perform models interacting populism with the left-right ideological dimension.

We include several controls. We control for the salience MEPs attach to transparency issues. As MEPs attach varying degrees of salience to certain policy issues (Font, 2025) and the salience of accountability affairs matters for legislators (Koop, 2011), we expect those who attach salience to transparency-related issues to supply and demand more transparency. For operationalisation, we discard using parliamentary questions, which could generate problems of endogeneity, and employ three alternative measures. Two are based on MEPs' digital communication on the 'X' platform (formerly Twitter) and another one on their legislative activity. Using attention on 'X' does not pose problems of representation, as 96% of MEPs tweeted during the period. We checked whether they posted content on transparency or related topics during the two-month period after the Qatargate scandal. For coding, we create a dictionary of transparency, also containing scandal-related keywords (see Appendix 6). A binary variable indicates whether the MEP posted content on these issues. As robustness checks, we also count the number of related posts. Still, given the uneven usage of digital media across countries, posting on social media might not accurately reflect MEPs' concerns about transparency. Additionally, we do not discard that some MEPs posted on the Qatargate scandal because they felt compelled to do so without having a lasting interest in transparency. To address this, we alternatively use the count of EP policy initiatives to promote transparency each MEP was involved in as a rapporteur, shadow rapporteur or rapporteur for opinion during EP9 (see Appendix 7). That said, we acknowledge the potential reverse causality between transparency concerns and behaviour.

We also control for MEPs' party government status, as legislators from parties in national opposition are more likely to hold governments and EU institutions to account (Font & Pérez-Durán, 2016) but downplay their claim when they enter government (Huber & Ruth, 2017). Data are taken from ParlGov (Döring et al., 2022). We also control for the type of electoral list system, based on the idea that MEPs elected under flexible and open list systems, compared with those elected under closed systems, are more inclined to build a personal profile (Finke, 2016; Hix, 2004) and to recognise interest group organisations (Ibenskas & Bunea, 2021). A binary variable takes the value 1 for closed lists and 0 for open/Single Transferable Vote systems. Given that the probability of holding (and publishing) meetings

with interest representatives and asking questions may be affected by MEPs' length of mandate during EP9, we control for the length of time served in the EP, expressed in days (log). We also control for gender (female = 1), as comparative research shows that women disapprove of corruption more than men (Esarey & Chirillo, 2013). MEPs' age is also controlled for as younger MEPs, often considered 'digital natives', might be more inclined to share information (Font & Pérez-Durán, 2023). The descriptive statistics of the dependent, independent and control variables are included in Appendix 8.

## Analysis

Given the structure of our data, in which MEPs are nested in parties and parties are nested in countries, and that our two dependent variables are count variables, we perform multi-level negative binomial regressions with random effects for parties and countries. For each of the two dependent variables, we perform three models: a simple model with our independent variables, a second model adding controls, and a third model with our independent variables and the interaction terms. The results are expressed as incidence rate ratios (IRR) and indicate the factor by which the incidence rate of the dependent variable changes for each one-unit increase of the independent variable. Broadly, an IRR higher than 1 suggests a positive effect of the independent variable on the incidence rate of the dependent variable, while an IRR lower than 1 suggests a negative effect. The results are reported in Table 2.

As expected, H1a on the effect of national democratic accountability tradition on MEPs' reporting of their meetings with interest representatives is confirmed. MEPs from countries with strong accountability traditions publish more meetings than those from countries with weak accountability regimes. Based on Model 1, for a one-unit increase in the accountability index, the count of meetings published is expected to increase by a factor of 3.9, holding other variables constant.

H1b on the effect of accountability tradition on transparency demanded is also corroborated, although the effect is smaller than that on transparency supplied. Based on Model 4, a one-unit increase in the accountability index is associated with a two-fold increase in the incidence rate of questions on transparency. In sum, as expected, strong accountability regimes increase the supply and demand of transparency in the EP.

As Model 1 shows, and in line with H2a, MEPs from populist parties are expected to report a 75% lower rate of meetings, compared to mainstream MEPs. By contrast, as expected in H2b, populism is positively and significantly associated with the demand for transparency. As indicated in Model 4, populism is associated with a 48% increase in the count of questions on

**Table 2.** Transparency supplied and demanded, IRR

|  | Transparency supplied | | | Transparency demanded | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | M1 | M2 | M3 | M4 | M5 | M6 |
| Accountability regime | 3.89*** (1.16) | 3.94*** (1.22) | 5.75*** (1.71) | 2.12** (0.64) | 2.67*** (0.75) | 1.55 (0.51) |
| Populism | 0.23*** (0.04) | 0.26*** (0.05) | 1.32 (0.94) | 1.42** (0.23) | 1.56*** (0.23) | 0.28* (0.21) |
| Accountability regime*Populism |  |  | 0.3** (0.14) |  |  | 2.96*** (1.44) |
| *Controls* |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Salience (social media attention) |  | 1.68*** (0.22) |  |  | 1.35*** (0.11) |  |
| National government |  | 1.45** (0.23) |  |  | 0.76** (0.09) |  |
| Closed list |  | 1.28 (0.31) |  |  | 1.55** (0.33) |  |
| Period serving (log) |  | 1.67** (0.35) |  |  | 4.72*** (0.94) |  |
| Gender (female) |  | 1.1 (0.13) |  |  | 0.99 (0.07) |  |
| Age |  | 0.99* (0.01) |  |  | 0.99** (0.003) |  |
| *Random effects* |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Country | 0.11 (0.11) | 0.12 (0.1) | 0.05 (0.09) | 0.13 (0.08) | 0.1 (0.06) | 0.12 (0.07) |
| Party | 0.26 (0.1) | 0.24 (0.09) | 0.23 (0.09) | 0.39 (0.1) | 0.33 (0.08) | 0.36 (0.09) |
| Constant | 10.82*** (5.15) | 0.21 (0.35) | 6.05*** (2.82) | 0.57 (0.27) | 0.001*** (0.001) | 0.93 (0.47) |
| AIC | 6726.045 | 6551.146 | 6721.723 | 2841.181 | 2678.64 | 2838.187 |
| BIC | 6753.221 | 6605.108 | 6753.429 | 2868.358 | 2732.601 | 2869.893 |
| N | 685 | 663 | 685 | 685 | 663 | 685 |

Note: Coefficients are incidence rate ratios. Standard errors in parentheses.
*p < .1.
**p < .05.
***p < .01.

transparency. Overall, the results suggest that MEPs from populist parties hold external actors to higher transparency standards than they hold themselves.

H3a and H3b test the interaction effects of the national accountability regime and populism on transparency supplied and demanded. As expected, no differences in transparency supplied and demanded are observed between populists and mainstream MEPs from countries with weak democratic accountability. However, as expected, when coming from countries with stronger accountability regimes, MEPs from populist and mainstream parties differ substantially in their supply and demand for transparency. Based on Model 3, we plot the marginal effects of populism on transparency supplied at different values of accountability, at 95% CIs. Figure 1 shows that, for medium-to-high levels of accountability, differences between populist and mainstream parties are statistically significant. For MEPs from mainstream parties, an increase in the accountability index is associated with a substantial increase in the number of meetings reported. MEPs from mainstream parties report on average 17 meetings at the lowest level of the accountability index, moving to 230 at the highest level. By contrast, for MEPs from populist parties, an increase in the accountability index does not lead to an increase in transparency supplied. They report on average 12 and 27 meetings at the lowest and highest level of accountability, respectively, with differences within populists not being statistically significant. In
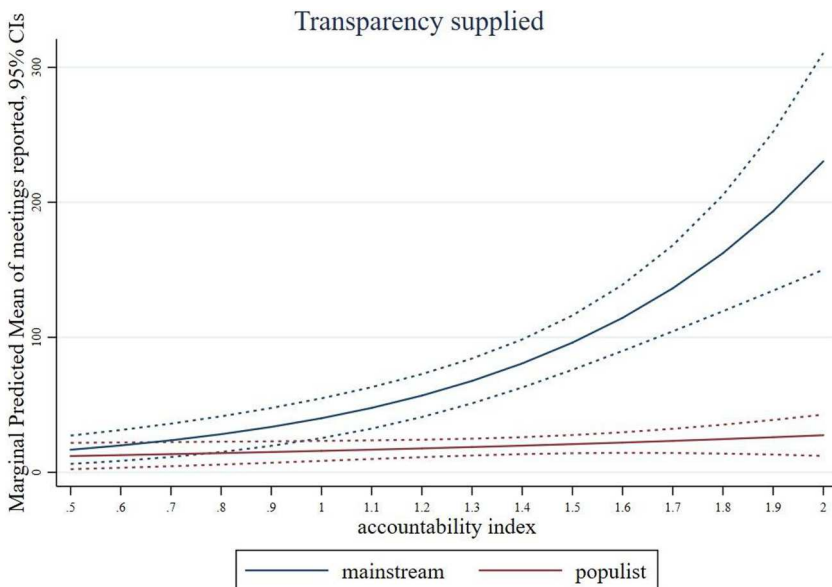


**Figure 1.** Transparency supplied: marginal effects of populism across levels of democratic accountability, 95% CIs.

brief, MEPs from mainstream parties are significantly more transparent as national democratic accountability standards increase. This is not observed among populist MEPs. For details on how to interpret IRR when using inter-actions and the distribution of populism across the entire accountability vari-able, see Appendix 9.

Based on Model 6, we plot the marginal effects of populism on transpar-ency demanded at different values of accountability, at 95% CIs. Figure 2 shows that for MEPs from countries with weak democratic accountability regimes, no differences between populist and mainstream parties are observed. However, at higher levels of accountability, MEPs from populist parties ask more questions demanding transparency than MEPs from main-stream parties. At the highest level of democratic accountability, MEPs from mainstream parties ask on average 2.9 questions, while those from populist parties ask on average 7. While the CIs for the estimated marginal effects of populists and mainstream parties slightly overlap at higher levels of accountability, the line for populist MEPs is clearly ascending. When calcu-lating the marginal effects at 90% CIs, differences between mainstream and populist parties are statistically significant between scores of 1.7 and 1.9 on a 0.5-2 scale (see Appendix 10). In brief, MEPs from populist parties request significantly more transparency as national democratic accountability stan-dards increase. No such effect is observed among mainstream MEPs.
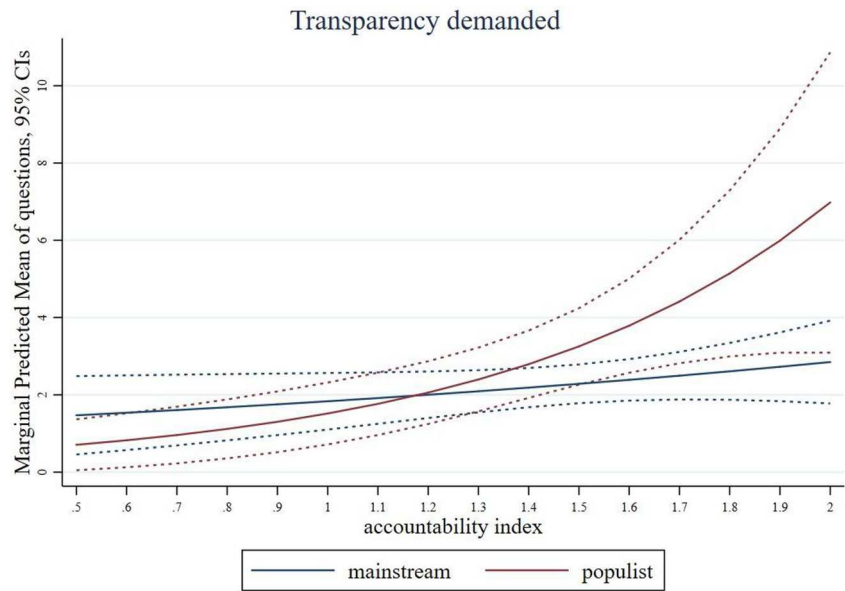


**Figure 2.** Transparency demanded: marginal effects of populism across levels of demo-cratic accountability, 95% CIs.

The results do not change substantially when including controls. Attaching high salience to transparency issues, measured by attention to digital media, has a higher IRR of both transparency supplied and demanded. Finally, MEPs from parties in the national government report more meetings with interest representatives and ask fewer questions claiming transparency.

### Robustness checks

We perform robustness checks on the sample, the dependent and the independent/control variables. We run the analysis excluding MEPs who did not serve the full parliamentary term, and the results remain practically unaltered. Regarding transparency supplied, the results remain almost unchanged when using underreporting of meetings and the additive index of transparency. When using a binary dependent variable on publishing, the accountability regime does not attach statistical significance, which may be due to oversimplification of the relationship (see Appendix 11). When coding transparency demanded based on a BERT model, the results remain largely unchanged (see Appendix 11).

Regarding the independent variables, we perform the analysis using the mean accountability index score over a five-year period, with the results remaining unchanged. We also perform the analysis using the V-Dem diagonal accountability index to test hypotheses on transparency supplied and the horizontal accountability index to test those on transparency demanded. None reached statistical significance, suggesting that it is the accountability regime as a set of norms and relationships rather than its specific dimensions, that influences transparency supplied and demanded. We also run all the analyses using the World Bank Control of Corruption Index and the V-Dem liberal democracy index as alternatives to democratic accountability. For the latter, we removed parties from the random effects, as the associated variance was low and the standard errors were high otherwise. The results are consistent with our findings.

We perform the analysis using far-right parties as an alternative to populism. Far-right parties supply less transparency and demand more transparency than non-far-right ones, but the effect size is lower than when using populism. When interacting accountability regimes and far-right for transparency supply, differences between far-right and non-far-right are smaller compared to populism. Importantly, no significant differences are found in the transparency demanded (see Appendix 11). This suggests that populism accounts better for transparency supplied and demanded than far-right ideology. As MEPs from far-right populist parties may be excluded from participation in decision-making (Ripoll-Servent & Panning, 2021), we perform the analysis without MEPs from the Identity and Democracy political group. We also run models introducing minimal changes in the coding of populism. In all cases, the core results remain unaltered.

Given the distinction between left – and right-wing populism, we perform models interacting populism with the party's ideological position, taking scores from CHES data (Jolly et al., 2022). The results show that MEPs from parties located between the centre and extreme right (scores from 4 to 10, on a 0–10 scale) publish fewer meetings with interest representatives, and that differences between populists and non-populists are statistically significant for moderate to far-right parties. Regarding transparency demanded, differences are found between populists and non-populists from centre-to-right parties, although no statistically significant differences are found within populists and within non-populists (see Appendix 11).

We also conduct several t-tests to check whether populists perform less in various legislative activities accessible to all MEPs and for which data are available. Populists ask significantly more questions (on any topic) and propose more individual motions compared to mainstream ones, while no significant differences are observed between the two groups in terms of plenary speeches or opinions as shadow rapporteurs. Therefore, concerns over lower work effort are unlikely to be a problem in our study.

Regarding controls, when using MEPs' involvement in EP legislative initiatives on transparency as a measure of salience, no significant effects are found for either of our two dimensions of transparency. One possible explanation is that the measure is biased toward MEPs actively involved in transparency initiatives, thereby excluding others who are also concerned. When using the count of posts, only transparency demanded attains statistical significance, at $p < 0.1$.

Finally, we perform all models including parliamentary committees to check the potential effect of policy issues, taking Economic and Monetary Affairs Committee as the reference category. MEPs from the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs supply less transparency, whereas those from the Committee on Budgets demand less transparency.

## Discussion and conclusion

This study addresses the question of under what conditions MEPs supply and demand transparency from EU executive actors. By combining both types of activities, the study addresses transparency from the broader perspective of democratic accountability, by which the EP acts as both an actor and as a forum when performing policy-making and oversight functions. It contributes to EU transparency research and research on populism by showing that the tension between national accountability regimes and populism affects transparency supplied and transparency demanded differently.

First, our analysis shows that national stringent accountability regimes influence MEPs' behaviour, increasing the provision of information on their meetings with interest representatives and the request for more transparency from EU executive actors. Our findings are consistent with previous work by

Font and Pérez-Durán ([2023](#)) showing that countries with high corruption-mitigation credentials increase MEPs' likelihood to report on their contacts with interest representatives. However, it takes a step forward in showing that a national background of strong accountability also increases the demand for transparency. Overall, this implies that national accountability traditions are translated into how MEPs behave both in terms of providing and demanding transparency.

Second, our results shed light on populist parties' approach to transparency, providing novel theoretical arguments and empirical evidence on how populists leverage accountability regimes. Our findings show that MEPs from populist parties supply less transparency but demand more transparency than mainstream MEPs. That is, they hold external actors to higher transparency standards than they hold themselves. By adopting a conception of society separating the people and the elite and emphasising people-centrism and anti-elitism, MEPs from populist parties take the opportunity to demand transparent behaviour from the European Commission and other EU institutions and political elites, which in their rhetoric they portray as untransparent and corrupt. By contrast, populists tend to erode transparency norms through non-compliance. This dualistic behaviour reflects populists' moralistic claim of authenticity, which involves portraying elites as lacking transparency while emphasising the integrity of the people, as previous work by Roelofs ([2019](#)) would suggest, and at the same time bypassing transparency rules regarding their own activities.

Third, the core findings of our analysis make a novel contribution to research on populism in Europe by engaging with previous studies exploring the interconnection between populist parties' behaviour and democratic qualities (e.g., Gherghina & Mitru, [2024](#); Gherghina & Pilet, [2021](#)). Our results show that, for MEPs from countries with weaker democratic accountability regimes, regardless of whether they are from mainstream or populist parties, the opportunities and incentives to improve transparency supplied and demanded are low, resulting in uniformly low transparency for both types of legislators. By contrast, we demonstrate that MEPs from countries with stronger accountability regimes perform differently in terms of transparency supplied and demanded depending on whether they are members of mainstream or populist parties. When coming from countries with stronger accountability, MEPs from mainstream parties supply more transparency than populist MEPs, while populist MEPs demand more transparency than mainstream ones. Our interpretation is that, when socialised in countries with stronger accountability relations, MEPs from mainstream parties tend to perform more transparently as a way to adhere to democratic values. Yet, with similar national backgrounds, MEPs from populist parties are more inclined to use oversight mechanisms to amplify their anti-elitist rhetoric and portray themselves as the 'moral' defenders of integrity. In brief, populists' dual behaviour in their supply and demand for transparency suggests

that they make instrumental use of transparency to question the legitimacy of EU political elites and established institutions.

Our analysis is not without limitations. It raises concerns about the potential relationship between Euroscepticism, populism, and transparency demands toward EU bureaucrats. Future research could explore the nuanced relationships between Euroscepticism and populism and their effects on transparency demanded. Similarly, it could investigate whether the effects of democratic accountability on transparency are influenced by other country characteristics.

Investigating the drivers of transparency supplied and demanded in the EP, as well as their inconsistencies, has relevant normative implications. Understanding better the rationale behind transparency in the chamber representing European citizens raises concerns about public trust and the credibility of EU institutions. Further research would benefit from addressing whether and to what extent transparency practices in the EP influence citizens' trust in EU institutions. Our study also raises concerns about the relationships between populism and diverse aspects of democratic governance in Europe. In particular, it raises the normatively relevant, albeit paradoxical, concern that populism finds fertile ground in national regimes with strong democratic accountability standards. To reach a better understanding of this relationship, future research would benefit from conducting related analyses using a cross-country comparative perspective. Lastly, investigating qualitatively the intricacies between populism and various expressions of democratic quality, both in the Member States and at the EU level, would contribute to a better understanding of some major challenges and the seemingly intrinsic contradictions of contemporary democracy in Europe.

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