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Populism in the EU and the trade-off between ethical claiming and mainstreaming

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates how national government-opposition dynamics influence populists' ethical claims in the supranational arena. While research on populism highlights moral integrity rhetoric and examines whether populist parties moderate once in office, less is known about how they adjust ethical claiming supranationally when entering national government. Using written questions in the European Parliament, this study asks: Do legislators from populist parties raise more ethical claims than mainstream ones? Do they moderate when their party enters national government? Do they behave differently when targeting European Union (EU)- versus national-level actors? The findings show that, outside government, populist Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) raise more ethical questions than mainstream MEPs, but once in office they moderate more strongly than mainstream legislators. For opposition parties, populist-mainstream differences are larger for EU-level than for national-level targets, and this EU-level difference narrows when populists enter office. The study contributes to debates on populism in multi-level contexts.

KEYWORDS Populism; public ethics; European Parliament; government-opposition; parliamentary questions

This study examines how populists' ethical claims at the supranational level are affected by national government-opposition dynamics. Focusing on the European Parliament (EP), it investigates whether populist parties adjust their ethical claims towards political elites when they enter national government. Ethical claims refer to the criticism or questioning of public officials and institutions for unethical conduct, that is, for failing to adhere to public integrity standards (Alemanno 2025). Understanding whether populist legislators adapt their ethical claims is relevant because populist

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parties have entered government in several member states in recent years and public ethics and integrity have become central to European Union (EU) democratic quality and trust, especially following recent scandals such as Qatargate – considered the largest corruption case since the establishment of the EP (Costa 2024).

Despite the growing governmental participation of populist parties across Europe (Ferwerda *et al.* 2025), and the increasing centrality of public ethics in debates on EU democratic legitimacy and political trust (Alemanno 2025; Avril and Korkea-aho 2025), it remains unclear how these parties engage with ethical issues within EU institutions and address the potential dilemma of maintaining or moderating their claims when entering national office. This gap matters because populists often portray politics as a moral confrontation between ‘the pure people’ and a ‘corrupt elite’ (Moffitt 2016; Mudde 2007), presenting themselves as defenders of integrity. Yet, it is unclear whether this moral rhetoric is maintained when they become part of the governing establishment. While populist discourse places ethics at its core, we know little about how populist Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) use formal parliamentary instruments such as written questions to raise ethical concerns. Because written questions can direct scrutiny referred to EU-level and national-level actors (Akbik and Migliorati 2024; Brack and Costa 2019; Guinaudeau and Costa 2022; Proksch and Slapin 2011), it is also unclear whether populists’ ethical claiming varies across target levels and how this interacts with national government status. We therefore ask three research questions: Do MEPs from populist parties raise more ethical claims than their mainstream counterparts? Do populists moderate their behaviour when their party holds national government? Do they behave differently when targeting EU-level versus national-level actors?

Previous research has investigated whether populist parties in government pose a threat to democratic quality (e.g. Akkerman and Rooduijn 2015; König and Swalve 2023) and whether they fail to deliver ethics policies or reduce corruption (e.g. Kostadinova 2024). However, whether they adjust their moralising discourse and strategies once in power remains uncertain. Entering national government creates a strategic trade-off: maintaining anti-elitism and moralising claims may conflict with the responsibilities of governing. We build on the inclusion-moderation debates (Akkerman and Rooduijn 2015; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Schwörer 2022; Zulianello 2025) to examine whether populists moderate their ethical claiming when holding office. This trade-off is particularly puzzling in the EU context. Given populists’ mistrust of supranational institutions (Van Kessel *et al.* 2020), they may face a dilemma between

preserving their moralistic discourse and adapting to the constraints associated with national incumbency.

This article addresses this trade-off by analysing how populist parties use parliamentary questions in the EP to make ethical claims. The EP has become increasingly relevant for both parties and voters in recent election cycles (Hartland *et al.* 2026) and, by representing parties from all 27 member states, it provides a unique legislative arena to examine populists' ethical claiming towards EU-level and national-level actors. Although our focus remains on national party populism, MEPs act through European Political Groups (EPG) that coordinate parliamentary activity and define oversight strategies (Akbik and Migliorati 2023; Guinaudeau and Costa 2022). We therefore recognise that differences in ethical claiming may reflect not only the characteristics of national parties, but also those of the EPG in which they operate. These features make the EP a suitable arena in which to examine how populists' integrity rhetoric translates into ethical claiming, thereby speaking to prior studies examining the consistency between populists' rhetoric and behaviour (Font and Ares 2026; Gherghina and Mitru 2025; Gherghina and Pilet 2021; Roelofs 2019; Stefanelli *et al.* 2025).

Building on these insights, we elaborate theoretical arguments suggesting that populist parties modify their ethical claims according to national governing status and the institutional level of their targets. Our theoretical reasoning draws on the discursive patterns that characterise populists, particularly in how they define themselves and their adversaries. Populism has been conceptualised as a thin-centred ideology that perceives society as divided into the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite' (Mudde 2007), with the moral corruption of the elite often regarded as its distinctive focus (Casiraghi and Bordignon 2023). Populism emphasises anti-elitism (Böhmelt *et al.* 2022; Mudde 2007; Pirro and Stanley 2022; Rooduijn 2019), portrays populist parties as guardians of integrity (Font and Ares 2026; Roelofs 2019), and rejects supranationalism (Van Kessel *et al.* 2020). These features motivate expectations about how populists' ethical questioning varies with national governing status and with whether questions target EU-level or national-level actors.

We base our analysis on parliamentary questions asked during the 9th EP legislature. Parliamentary questions are commonly used by MEPs to scrutinise executive actors at the EU level (Akbik and Migliorati 2024; Font and Pérez-Durán 2016; Guinaudeau and Costa 2022; Jensen *et al.* 2013). We focus on parliamentary questions to trace how MEPs use this formal mechanism to make claims about alleged ethical misconduct by public actors. We use a unique dataset combining manually coded questions with data on MEPs from the 9th EP. Our findings show that populist MEPs raise more ethical questions than their mainstream counterparts,

consistent with their self-portrayal as advocates of moral integrity. Moreover, populist MEPs outside national government ask more ethical questions than mainstream MEPs in the same governing situation, but moderate once in office, more strongly than mainstream MEPs. For opposition parties, populist-mainstream differences are larger for EU-level than for national-level targets, and this EU-level difference narrows when populists enter office. Among populists, ethical questioning declines in office, with the clearest reduction for EU targets.

Our study provides empirical and theoretical contributions. Empirically, it offers new evidence on differences between MEPs from populist and mainstream parties in their use of parliamentary oversight tools to advance ethical claims. Theoretically, it contributes to a better understanding of populist parties' trade-off between maintaining their ethical claims and mainstreaming, contributing to debates on the inclusion-moderation thesis and on the role of populism in EU governance. They are also suggestive that this trade-off may be expressed not only through national-party populism, but also through the political groups in which those parties are embedded. The study also raises the normative question of whether populists' supranational ethical claims primarily seek democratic accountability or also reflect strategic purposes linked to anti-elitism and Euroscepticism.

What do we talk about when talking about public ethics?

Ethical standards and oversight mechanisms are key for democratic quality, as they help prevent public interests from being undermined for personal gains. They also matter because unethical conduct can erode citizens' trust in public institutions and policy processes. Public integrity is defined similarly across international institutions: the Council of Europe links public ethics to the implementation of ethical standards by public officials to protect the public good (Council of Europe 2020); the United Nations frames integrity as a core obligation for civil servants (United Nations 2024); and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) highlights integrity as vital to safeguarding the public interest and reinforcing democratic values (OECD 2017).

Building on these principles and the specialised literature, we identify four categories most often studied in public ethics: corruption, conflicts of interest, revolving doors, and whistleblower unprotection (e.g. Alemanno 2025; Avril and Korkea-aho 2025; Bolleyer *et al.* 2020; Carpenter and Moss 2014; Niklasson *et al.* 2025; Rose and Heywood 2013; Seabrooke and Tsingou 2021). While their conceptual borders may overlap, each category retains distinct characteristics. Corruption refers to the abuse of entrusted power for private gain, including bribery, improper influence, and nepotism (Rose and Heywood 2013; Transparency International

2025). Conflicts of interest occur when public officials' impartial exercise of duties is compromised by private interests (Messick 2014), such as holding secondary posts or accepting gifts (Bolleyer *et al.* 2020). Revolving doors describe the movement into private sector jobs related to previous public roles, potentially undermining public trust (Avril and Korkea-aho 2025) and enabling regulatory capture (Carpenter and Moss 2014; Seabrooke and Tsingou 2021). Whistleblowing involves insiders reporting illegal or unethical practices and can help expose misconduct in public organisations (Davies and Van Waeyenberge 2025; Lewis *et al.* 2014; Near and Miceli 1985; Niklasson *et al.* 2025). Because whistleblowers may face personal costs (Niklasson *et al.* 2025), their protection is a pillar of ethical governance (Davies and Van Waeyenberge 2025). Together, these categories provide a framework for analysing ethical claims at the EU level.

Ethical claiming through parliamentary questions

Ethical claiming may be individually exercised in the EP through different oversight instruments, such as speeches and parliamentary questions (Maricut-Akbik 2021). While these are individual prerogatives, written questions impose fewer institutional constraints than speeches: they are accessible to all MEPs, less constrained by party leadership (Akbik and Migliorati 2023), and are not allocated to political groups proportionally to their size (Sorace 2018). Questions allow MEPs to oversee EU executive actors (Akbik and Migliorati 2024; Font and Pérez-Durán 2016; Proksch and Slapin 2011), represent territorial interests (Brack and Costa 2019; Chiru 2018), promote certain issues (e.g. Akbik and Migliorati 2024; Bevan *et al.* 2024; Otjes and Louwerse 2018; Proksch and Slapin 2011), and agenda-setting (Chiru and Wunsch 2023; Guinaudeau and Costa 2022). Addressed primarily to the Commission and the Council, questions function as a formal mechanism for demanding information, justification or rectification (Akbik and Migliorati 2024; Maricut-Akbik 2021), although MEPs may use them for electoral or career gains (Maricut-Akbik 2021).

Because ethical misconduct is broadly condemnable and written questions entail low procedural costs yet require a formal written response, MEPs have incentives to use them as a platform to signal integrity failures and place ethical concerns on the legislative agenda. Such questions may target the conduct of EU institutions, but they can also ask the EU executive to clarify its position or consider action in response to alleged misconduct by national or international actors. Interestingly, ethical questions targeting national actors may draw attention to MEPs' home countries (Akbik and Migliorati 2023; Brack and Costa 2019) while also enabling cross-national scrutiny (Chiru and Wunsch 2023). Although the Commission and the Council have limited authority to intervene on

purely domestic integrity issues – except in cases of EU non-compliance – MEPs can still use questions as fire-alarm oversight, alerting the Commission about perceived governmental failures and prompting it to clarify responsibilities, as well as for domestic signalling (Jensen *et al.* 2013; Proksch and Slapin 2011).

Ethical questions typically combine references to alleged malpractice, often grounded in published information, with requests for information, explanation, or corrective action. Illustratively, ethics questions targeting EU-level actors during the 9th legislature include inquiries into the Qatargate corruption scandal, potential conflicts of interest in COVID-19 vaccine procurement, revolving door concerns related to former Commissioners' cooling-off periods, and integrity controversies surrounding high-level appointments. Ethical questions addressing national actors commonly refer to alleged corruption or conflicts of interest in the member states, not only in the MEP's own country but also cross-nationally, calling on the Commission to assess potential breaches of EU rules or integrity standards. Overall, parliamentary questions are a suitable instrument for studying ethical claiming in a multi-level governance context.

Theoretical framework

In what follows, we develop arguments on the effects of populism, national government-opposition dynamics, and multi-level targeting on ethical claiming in the EP. We present arguments on how populists differ from mainstream parties, and how populist strategies shift between government and opposition depending on whether questions target EU- or national-level actors.

Populists' ethical claims

While the definition of populism remains contested (Meijers *et al.* 2025; Rooduijn 2019), research increasingly adopts an ideational approach that conceptualises populism as a thin ideology dividing society between 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite' (Mudde 2007; Rooduijn 2019). Although often associated with diverse host ideologies (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017), ideational approaches treat populism as a unique set of ideas portraying politics as a struggle between the people and the elite (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2022) expressed through an us-versus-them discourse (Schmidt 2025). While the distinction between populist and mainstream parties can be blurred, scholars generally agree that populism embraces anti-elitism, people centrism, and moral integrity claims (Böhmelt *et al.* 2022; Mudde 2007; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Pirro and Stanley 2022).

Recent studies link populism and various aspects of democratic governance (Carnegie *et al.* 2024; Font and Ares 2026; Juon and Bochsler 2020; Michener 2023), deliberation (Gherghina and Mitru 2025), and direct democracy (Gherghina and Pilet 2021; Jacobs *et al.* 2018; Meijers and Zaslove 2021; Mudde 2007). For integrity-related claiming, findings indicate that populist MEPs strategically demand more transparency than non-populists, seeking to benefit domestically (Font and Ares 2026). Building on this, we argue that populist parties' anti-elitism and moral integrity rhetoric give them incentives to use written questions to raise integrity concerns. We also draw on issue ownership logic: parties are more likely to table questions on issues they 'own' (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Otjes and Louwerse 2018). In this respect, populists portray themselves as the true representatives of the general will (Mudde 2007) and mobilise anti-corruption rhetoric to present themselves as defenders of political moralism (Mudde 2004). They are thus expected to use ethical questioning to signal alleged misconduct not only as a mechanism of democratic accountability but possibly as part of an anti-establishment strategy. In doing so, they can exploit public discontent with mainstream policymakers perceived failure to curb corruption, adopting an anti-corruption stance that promises to rectify what the establishment has neglected (Kartal 2025).

In the specific EP context, it is important to note that MEPs operate under a dual allegiance: they are representatives of their national parties and also members of EPG. These groups remain important as they coordinate parliamentary work, including oversight (Akbik and Migliorati 2023; Guinaudeau and Costa 2022). Nevertheless, we focus on national parties because populism is primarily defined at the national-party level, even if its expression in parliamentary behaviour may also be influenced by group-level positioning. We expect the anti-elitist and moralising features of populism to prompt MEPs from populist parties to ask more ethical questions than mainstream parties. Accordingly, we propose:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): MEPs from populist parties ask more ethical questions than MEPs from mainstream parties.

Government-opposition dynamics

Previous studies show that legislators tend to reduce oversight when their party holds national office (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Huber and Ruth 2017) and that governing dynamics matter for parliamentary questioning (Höhmman and Sieberer 2020). In the EP, research shows that government-opposition dynamics is a key driver of questioning behaviour (Font and Pérez-Durán 2016; Jensen *et al.* 2013; Proksch and Slapin 2011). As argued, legislators in national opposition obtain strategic

advantages by using questions to supervise and hold executive actors accountable (Akbik and Migliorati 2024; Guinaudeau and Costa 2022), suggesting that the EP provides an arena for national contestation (Jensen *et al.* 2013; Proksch and Slapin 2011). These oppositional incentives can translate into ethical questioning directed at domestic actors, other member states, or EU-level actors, enabling MEPs from non-governing parties out of office to criticise incumbents without facing high costs for misconduct or for policy failures (Vliegthart *et al.* 2013). We therefore expect:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): MEPs from parties outside national government ask more ethical questions than MEPs from parties in national government.

Populism and government-opposition dynamics

Oppositional incentives should be especially relevant for populist parties, for whom oversight can reinforce an anti-establishment narrative. Populists' anti-elitism and moralistic claims of authenticity (Böhmelt *et al.* 2022; Mudde 2007; Pirro and Stanley 2022; Roelofs 2019) are likely to be amplified when they are in opposition, where they can bring previously neglected moral issues into the political arena (Mansbridge and Macedo 2019). Being out of office may therefore enhance populists' anti-elite profile and their image as defenders of political integrity. We thus expect populist MEPs whose parties are outside national government to table more ethical questions than mainstream opposition MEPs.

However, populists may moderate their ethical claims when their party holds national government. The inclusion-moderation thesis argues that populist parties may tone down their rhetoric and strategies once in office, although evidence is mixed (Akkerman *et al.* 2016; Akkerman and Rooduijn 2015; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015; Crulli and Albertazzi 2025; König and Swalve 2023; Schwörer 2022; Zulianello 2020). Several studies suggest that populists may maintain or even intensify their rhetoric and strategies once in government (Akkerman and Rooduijn 2015; Schwörer 2022; Zulianello 2025) to differentiate themselves from mainstream parties and to portray their political opponents as immoral. Other studies find that populists in government tend to moderate (Bernhard 2020; König and Swalve 2023; Michal 2025; Thomeczek 2025; Zulianello 2025), sometimes even adopting features of mainstream parties (Cavalieri and Froio 2021). Whereas populists in opposition face few constraints in maximising their electoral appeal, holding government responsibility alters these incentives (Iversflaten 2005; Mudde 2007). Once in office, they face the dilemma of whether to persist with negative rhetoric or adopt more constructive alternatives (Michal 2025). On this basis, we argue that governing responsibilities, requiring greater pragmatism, integration into the

political establishment, coalition commitments, and greater exposure to political accountability (König and Swalve 2023; Schwörer 2022), lead populists in government to view signalling unethical behaviour as potentially counterproductive. Faced with the trade-off between maintaining or moderating their ethical questioning once in government, populists are expected to moderate.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): MEPs from populist parties outside national government ask more ethical questions than MEPs from mainstream parties outside national government.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): MEPs from populist parties outside national government ask more ethical questions than MEPs from populist parties in national government.

Populists' ethical claims in a multi-level context

Research on parliamentary questioning shows that the EP offers an arena for legislators, particularly those in national opposition, to signal both EU-level and national-level actors (Jensen *et al.* 2013; Proksch and Slapin 2011). Given that populist and mainstream parties differ in their views on European integration, we examine whether MEPs from opposition mainstream and populist parties differ in their ethical questioning, and whether populists moderate once in government depending on the level targeted. MEPs from populist parties outside national government are expected to be particularly active against EU-level actors, consistent with Euroscepticism, anti-elitist rhetoric, and portrayals of the EU as an unaccountable and corrupt elite (Chiru and Wunsch 2023; De Vries 2018; Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017). Moreover, benefitting from public dissatisfaction with the EU's perceived inability to combat corruption (Kartal 2025) may further incentivise EU-targeted ethical claims. By contrast, mainstream opposition parties, typically more pro-EU, have weaker motivations to pursue this EU-targeted strategy. Thus, differences between populists and mainstream parties outside government are expected to be stronger when directed at EU-level rather than national-level actors.

When targeting national-level actors, populists' incentives may shift once the party participates in national government. In office, they face greater scrutiny and reputational risks, making ethical accusations potentially costly. Criticising national actors, especially from their own country, can undermine their credibility and provoke political backlash when linked to domestic responsibilities or coalition constraints. We therefore expect differences between populists inside and outside government to be larger for national-level rather than EU-level targets.

Hypothesis 5 (H5): The effect expected in H3 (populists outside government vs. mainstream outside government) is stronger when MEPs target EU-level actors than national-level actors.

Hypothesis 6 (H6): The effect expected in H4 (populists in government vs. populists outside government) is stronger when populists target national-level actors than EU-level actors.

Data and methods

This article combines data on all written questions on ethical issues asked by MEPs during the 9th term with MEP-level data, following previous research on parliamentary questions as tools of transparency, accountability, and oversight (Akbik and Migliorati 2024; Font and Pérez-Durán 2016; Guinaudeau and Costa 2022; Jensen *et al.* 2013; Maricut-Akbik 2021). Questions were downloaded from the EP website.

We combine automated and manual coding of written questions. Following previous dictionary-based approaches (e.g. Akbik and Migliorati 2024; Harmening *et al.* 2025), we identified questions containing keywords related to public ethics and specific forms of misconduct (corruption, conflicts of interest, revolving doors, and whistleblowers' unprotection), including synonyms and related expressions in the title or the text (see Table A1 in the Online Appendix). We then manually checked the selected questions to remove false positives, resulting in a sample of 441 questions. Examples of questions targeting EU-level and national actors can be found in the Online Appendix. As an additional validity check, we manually examined a random sample of 400 further questions to ensure that none addressed ethical issues. To provide a more fine-grained analysis, we coded the type of unethical behaviour and the level of the targeted actor. For the type of ethical issue, we used four categories from our conceptual framework: corruption, conflicts of interest, revolving doors and whistleblowing unprotection, plus an 'other' category for unclear cases. For the level targeted, we coded whether the question targeted EU, national, or international actors. Our analysis retained all ethical questions for EU and national actors. In the national-target category, 17% of questions refer to several member states. We later test robustness by restricting this category to home-country questions. The inter-coder agreement percentages are higher than 93%, indicating strong reliability.

Descriptively, corruption is the most frequent topic (57%), followed by conflicts of interest (28%), while revolving doors and whistleblower unprotection each accounting for around 5%. Regarding targets, 39% of questions address national actors, 34% EU-level actors, and 27% international ones. Ethical concerns vary by target level. As shown in Figure 1,

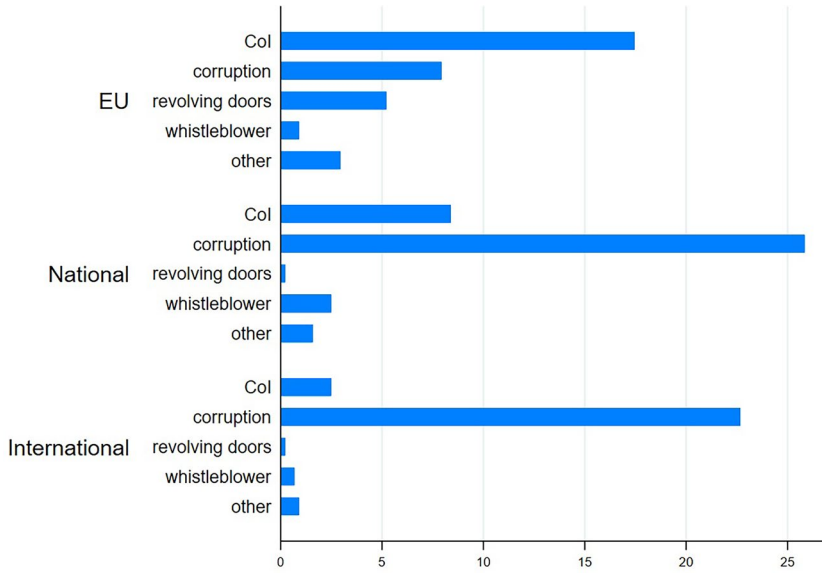


Figure 1. Ethical questions, by actors targeted and categories (%).

national targets are dominated by corruption, whereas EU targets primarily focus on conflicts of interest. Distributions across EPG and countries are reported in [Figures A1 and A2](#) in the [Online Appendix](#).

After coding ethical questions, we counted how many each MEP asked. As a single question may be asked by more than one MEP, our initial dataset uses the MEP-question pair as the unit of analysis. Then we merged these data with MEP-level information and coded variables at the individual, country, national party, and EPG levels. To test our hypotheses, we take MEPs serving at the end of the 9th term as the unit of analysis. The study includes 685 MEPs, representing 97% of the entire population. Excluded cases are MEPs from parties that could not be coded or had no party affiliation. Descriptively, 46% of MEPs asked at least one ethical question.

We also coded whether national-target questions referred to MEPs' home country or to other countries: 42% always refer to their own country and 48% always refer to other member states, indicating that national-target ethical questioning is often cross-national (see [Figure A3](#) in the [Online Appendix](#)). At MEP level, among those who ever target their home country, those from parties never or partly in government devote around half of their national-target ethics questions to their own member state on average (51% and 55%), whereas among MEPs from parties always in government this share drops to 8%, suggesting that governing-parties' national-target ethical questions are less home-focused (see [Figure A4](#) in

the [Online Appendix](#)). For MEPs from parties that alternated between government and opposition during the term, about 45% asked all ethical questions while in office, about 33% while out of office, and 24% both in and out of office (see [Figure A5](#) in the [Online Appendix](#)).

To test H1–H4, the dependent variable is the count of ethical questions asked by each MEP. For H5 and H6, our dependent variables are the counts of ethical questions targeting EU-level and national-level actors, respectively. As robustness checks, we use ethical questions as a proportion of all questions and binary indicators of whether MEPs asked any ethical question. We additionally test whether the results differ from focusing on home-country national targets versus other member states, as an alternative to our third dependent variable.

We operationalise our independent variables as follows. For populist party, we use the *PopuList* dataset (Rooduijn *et al.* 2023). For parties not covered, we proceed as follows: parties created after a split take the value of the original party; subnational parties linked to a national one take the value of the national one; and independent MEPs formerly affiliated with a party included in *PopuList* are assigned the value of the former party.

Our analysis focuses on national-party populism rather than political group populism, following previous related studies (i.e. Chiru and Wunsch 2023; Font and Ares 2026). We assume that MEPs' populist orientation is mainly determined by domestic party ideology, which also aligns with our core mechanism – national government-opposition dynamics – measured at the domestic party level. At the same time, we acknowledge that groups are important because they coordinate oversight (Akbik and Migliorati 2023; Guinaudeau and Costa 2022). Moreover, major scandals in the 9th legislature, namely Qatargate (involving MEPs from the S&D) and the controversy around vaccine procurement (centred on Commission President von der Leyen), may have disincentivised groups in the super-grand coalition from highlighting ethical issues, while incentivising groups outside the coalition to criticise the implicated actors. We therefore perform robustness checks to test whether our results are sensitive to political group dynamics and scandal-related group positioning. Given the importance of host ideologies in populism (Huber *et al.* 2021; Meijers *et al.* 2025), we perform robustness checks using the left-right ideology as alternative to populism. Also, given the concentration of populist parties in the extreme right of the political spectrum (Ripoll-Servent and Panning 2021), we run additional checks with a binary variable for far-right parties alternatively to populism. Because populist parties often reject supranationalism (Van Kessel *et al.* 2020), we also use EU position as an alternative to populism. To assess heterogeneity within mainstream parties with different EU positions, we perform the analysis for the mainstream subsample. Finally, to address concerns that populists may use ethical

questions instrumentally (Font and Ares 2026), we test whether populism is associated with a higher share of allegation-based (vs. evidence-based, mixed, or neutral) formulations.

For party national government status, we create a categorical variable with three values: parties never in government, shifting between government and opposition, and always in government during the 9th term. This captures qualitative differences between being in office, in opposition, and alternating between the two. Never in government is the reference category. We take data from *ParlGov* (Döring *et al.* 2022) and Wikipedia.

We include several controls. As national corruption may be related with ethical questioning, we control for national corruption using the ‘Control of Corruption’ indicator from the World’s Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators (Kaufmann and Kraay 2023). For the member states, scores range from 50 to 100, indicating the lowest and the highest levels of corruption, respectively. We also control for MEPs’ gender, the period serving (log), and the total number of parliamentary questions submitted. Controlling for total questions allows us to assess whether results reflect ethical issue prioritisation rather than overall questioning activity. Descriptive statistics for all variables are reported in Table A2 in the Online Appendix.

Analysis

As we use count dependent variables, and given the nested structure of our data, where MEPs are nested in parties, and parties are nested in countries, we estimate multi-level negative binomial regression models, with random effects for countries and national parties. We perform three models: M1 (and M1a and M1b for the EU- and national levels, respectively) includes the two main independent variables; M2 (and M2a and M2b) adds controls; and M3 (and M3a and M3b) includes the independent variables and the interaction between populism and government status. Results are expressed as Incidence Rate Ratios (IRR), indicating the factor by which the incidence rate of the dependent variable changes for each one-unit increase of the independent variable. Generally, an IRR higher than 1 indicates a positive effect and an IRR lower than 1 indicates a negative effect.

Our results confirm H1 on the effect of populism on ethical questioning (see Table 1). Based on M1, populism is associated with an estimated 68% higher expected number of ethical questions than mainstream actors. The results also lend support to H2, showing that MEPs from parties in national government ask fewer ethical questions than those never in government. As shown in M1, relative to MEPs from parties never in government, those from parties partly in national government submit an estimated 51% fewer ethical questions, and those from parties always in

Table 1. Ethical questioning (IRR).

	M1	M2	M3
Populism	1.68*** (0.32)	1.47** (0.25)	2.32*** (0.58)
National government (<i>ref. never</i>)			
Partly	0.49*** (0.09)	0.66*** (0.1)	0.58*** (0.12)
Always	0.36*** (0.09)	0.49*** (0.1)	0.5*** (0.13)
Populism * national government (<i>ref. never</i>)			
Partly			0.6 (0.24)
Always			0.16** (0.12)
Controls			
Control of corruption		1.01** (0.01)	
Gender (female)		0.88 (0.08)	
Age		0.99 (0.01)	0.87 (0.16)
Period serving (log)		2.99*** (0.77)	
Total questions		1.01*** (0.001)	
Random effects			
Country	0.18 (0.11)	0.04 (0.05)	0.17 (0.1)
Party	0.4 (0.13)	0.31 (0.1)	0.36 (0.13)
Constant	0.96 (0.17)	0.001** (0.001)	0.87 (0.16)
AIC	1927.335	1724.256	1923.666
BIC	1959.04	1778.609	1964.431
N	685	685	685

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

national government submit an estimated 64% fewer ethical questions. The results do not substantially change when adding controls, including total questioning activity, suggesting that the effects reflect ethical prioritisation rather than differences in overall activity.

The results also support H3 showing that MEPs from populist parties outside national government ask significantly more ethical questions than MEPs from mainstream parties in the same situation. Based on M3, we calculate the marginal effects of populism when the party is in and out of government, at 95% CIs. Figure 2 includes two graphs illustrating the effects of populism conditional on whether the party is in government. Predicted counts indicate that out of government, populists ask on average 2.6 ethical questions versus about 1.1 for mainstream opposition MEPs. Consistent with H4, populists moderate strongly when in office: predicted ethical questioning drops when populists enter government, from 2.6 to 0.2 on average. Moreover, the negative effect of moving from opposition to government is much stronger among populists than among mainstream parties. Among mainstream parties, government participation is associated with only a small reduction in ethical questioning, from roughly 1.1 when never in government to about 0.6 when always in government, with overlapping 95% CIs.

Disaggregating by target level shows that populism significantly affects ethical questioning targeting EU-level actors, but not national-level actors (see Table 2). In line with H5, opposition populists differ from opposition mainstream MEPs more strongly for EU-level targets. Based on M3a and M3b, we calculate the marginal effects of populism and government status

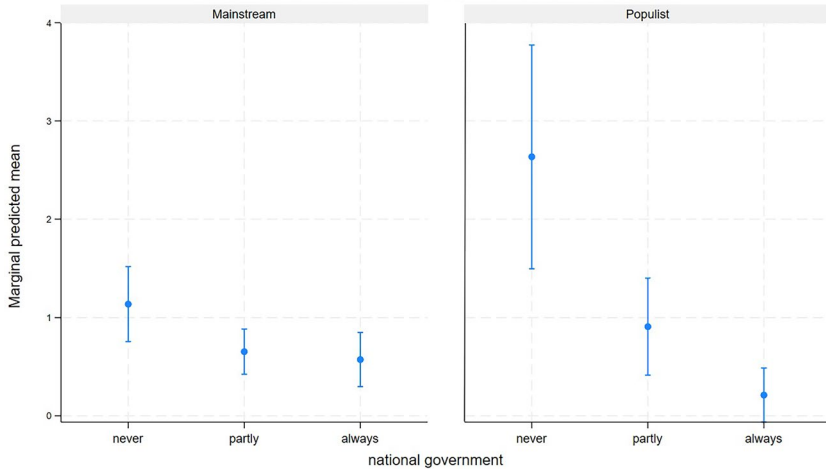


Figure 2. Marginal effects of national government, by populism, 95% CIs.

Table 2. Ethical questioning targeting EU / national-level actors (IRR).

	EU level			National level		
	M1a	M2a	M3a	M1b	M2b	M3b
Populism	3.07*** (0.7)	2.64*** (0.57)	3.55*** (1.03)	0.99 (0.27)	0.79 (0.21)	1.22 (0.42)
National government (ref. never)						
Partly	0.45*** (0.11)	0.6** (0.13)	0.48** (0.15)	0.47*** (0.11)	0.67* (0.15)	0.52** (0.14)
Always	0.47*** (0.14)	0.59* (0.16)	0.64 (0.22)	0.29*** (0.1)	0.42*** (0.14)	0.38*** (0.14)
Populism * national government (ref. never)						
Partly			0.92 (0.44)			0.76 (0.42)
Always			0.16* (0.15)			0.14 (0.18)
Controls						
Control of corruption		1.03*** (0.01)			0.99 (0.01)	
Gender (female)		0.8* (0.1)			0.97 (0.13)	
Age		0.99* (0.01)			0.99 (0.01)	
Period serving (log)		2.36*** (0.73)			3.63*** (1.67)	
Total questions		1.01*** (0.001)			1.01*** (0.001)	
Random effects						
Country	0.43 (0.23)	0.12 (0.11)	0.33 (0.2)	0.22 (0.16)	0.1 (0.11)	0.23 (0.17)
Party	0.37 (0.17)	0.38 (0.15)	0.39 (0.17)	0.75 (0.24)	0.67 (0.2)	0.72 (0.23)
Constant	0.25*** (0.06)	0.001*** (0.001)	0.24*** (0.06)	0.41*** (0.09)	0.001*** (0.001)	0.38*** (0.09)
AIC	1126.783	1035.462	1126.08	1143.2	1045.745	1144.124
BIC	1158.489	1089.815	1166.845	1174.906	1100.098	1184.889
N	685	685	685	685	685	685

Notes: *** $p < .01$. ** $p < .05$. * $p < .1$. Coefficients are odd ratios. Standard errors are in parentheses.

for ethical questions targeting EU- and national-level actors, respectively, with 95% CIs. MEPs from populist parties out of government ask about 1.2 ethical questions targeting EU-level actors, compared to 0.3 for

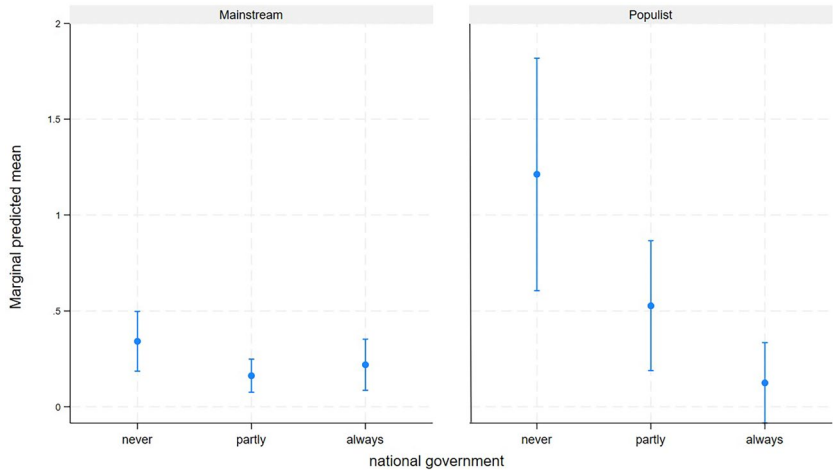


Figure 3. Marginal effects of national government on ethical questioning, by populism: EU-level targets, 95% CIs.

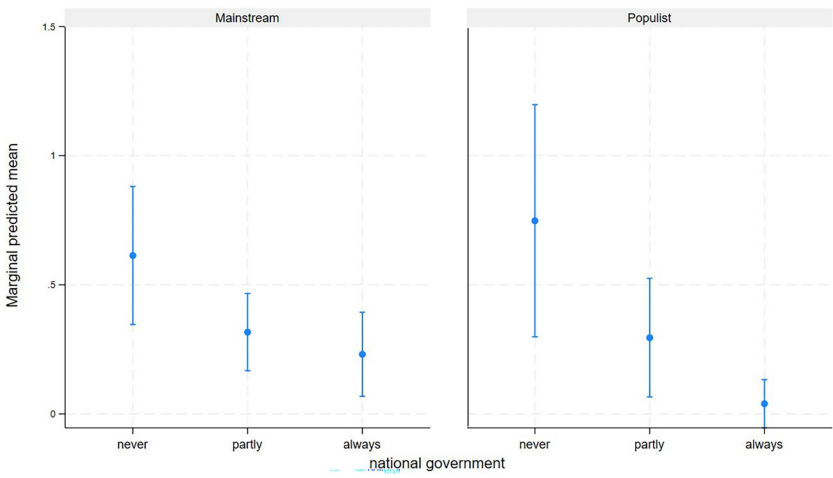


Figure 4. Marginal effects of national government on ethical questioning, by populism: national-level targets, 95% CIs.

mainstream opposition MEPs. For national targets, predicted counts are similar between populists and mainstream: MEPs from populist parties out of office ask about 0.8 questions versus 0.6 for opposition mainstream MEPs, with overlapping confidence intervals. Results also reflect mainstream parties' stronger oppositional activity towards national rather than EU-level actors (see Figures 3 and 4). Within populists, ethical questioning declines markedly from opposition to government for both EU-level (about 1.2 vs. 0.1) and national-level targets (0.8 vs. near zero). However,

the results do not support H6, as the reduction associated with government participation is not stronger for national-level than for EU-level targets (see [Figures 3 and 4](#)).

Robustness checks

We perform the analysis using the share of ethical questions and binary outcomes as alternative dependent variables, with results going in line with our core findings (see [Tables A3 and A4](#) and [Figures A6, A7 and A8](#) in the [Online Appendix](#); and [Tables A5 and A6](#) and [Figures A9, A10 and A11](#)). For models related to national targets, using the share of ethical questions referring to MEP's own country as a dependent variable does not substantially alter the results (see [Table A7](#) in the [Online Appendix](#)).

When including EPG fixed effects, populism loses statistical significance in models pooling all questions and is only significant at $p < .1$ for EU-level targets, suggesting that the baseline association may partly reflect differences across EPGs (see [Tables A8 and A9](#) in the [Online Appendix](#)). Ethical questioning is more frequent in some groups, namely, ID and The Greens in pooled models, and ID and The Left for EU-targets. This suggests that the link between national-party populism and ethical claiming may partly reflect populists' distribution across groups with different oversight strategies. Additionally, when controlling for the Rice index calculated from VoteWatch data for 2019–2022 ([Hix et al. 2022](#)) as a coarse proxy for group discipline, populism remains statistically significant, although we interpret this cautiously. These results indicate that national-party populism remains relevant, but that its association with ethical questioning is partly influenced by group-level dynamics. Examining whether and how EP group dynamics mediate the relationship between national-party populism and ethical questioning warrants further research.

Comparing the pre- and post-Qatargate periods, the mean share of ethical questions increases from 2.2% to 2.7%. Overall questioning does not increase after Qatargate: the average daily number of questions per MEP declines, and the average daily number of ethical questions per MEP remains very low and decreases slightly (see [Table A10](#) in the [Online Appendix](#)). Taken together, these patterns suggest a shift in relative emphasis towards ethical issues, rather than an increase in ethical questioning in absolute terms. Two additional regressions estimating the count of ethical questions in the pre- and post-scandal periods yield results consistent with our main findings (see [Table A11](#) in the [Online Appendix](#)).

Because the scandal did not affect all political groups similarly, we examine between-group differences in the change from the pre- to the post-Qatargate period using one-way ANOVA with Bonferroni-adjusted

post-hoc comparisons. The results reveal a highly heterogeneous response across political groups ($F=83.96$, $p<.001$). The largest increase is observed among ID, followed by ECR, The Left, and Renew, which show similar changes. The EPP increases modestly, S&D hardly changes, and The Greens show a small decline (see [Figure A12](#) in the [Online Appendix](#)). Overall, this pattern is consistent with the scandal creating a strategic opportunity for some groups, with alliance incentives being largely associated with group-level variation.

In order to address concerns that populists may use ethical questioning in a more strategic way, we code whether each question is primarily allegation-based ($= 1$) rather than evidence-based, mixed, or neutral ($= 0$). We then calculate, for each MEP, the share of their ethical questions that are allegation-based and estimate mixed-effects models among MEPs who asked at least one ethical question ($N=320$). We interpret these results cautiously given the reduced sample size and borderline classifications in some cases, but we do not find evidence that populism is associated with higher allegation shares (see [Table A12](#) in the [Online Appendix](#)).

The analysis is also run using the left-right ideology and EU positioning as alternatives to populism, using data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Jolly *et al.* 2022). For ideology, the scores range from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right). Ideology does not significantly affect ethical questioning (see [Table A13](#) in the [Online Appendix](#)). We also estimate models with far-right parties as an alternative to populism, with a binary variable taking the value 1 for parties with a score of ≥ 8.5 in the left-right ideological dimension. Far-right MEPs do not significantly ask more ethical questions in general, but they do so when targeting EU-level actors. Regarding interactions, no significant differences are found between opposition mainstream and far-right parties. MEPs from governing far-right parties moderate more strongly their ethical questioning (see [Figure A13](#) in the [Online Appendix](#)). We did not perform the analysis for far-left parties as none of them was in office for the full period.

For EU position, the score ranges from 1 (anti-EU) to 7 (pro-EU) and is strongly associated with populism (Spearman's $\rho = -0.73$, $p<.001$). Accordingly, replacing populism with EU position yields largely unchanged results, although EU position does not attain statistical significance in M2 for the pooled sample (see [Tables A14](#) and [A15](#) in the [Online Appendix](#)). To assess heterogeneity within mainstream parties, we perform Model 1 with the mainstream subsample: EU position is not significantly associated with ethical questions (overall, EU-target, or national-target). For the populist subsample, EU position is negatively associated with overall and EU-target ethical questions. These patterns reduce concerns that our main results are primarily driven by EU positioning, while suggesting that populism captures a distinct dimension beyond Euroscepticism.

Finally, because some parties have few legislators, we estimate the models only including country-level random intercepts. The results remain largely unchanged.

Discussion and conclusions

This study analyses how populist and mainstream parties differ in their ethical claiming in the EP, and whether their strategies shift between government and opposition and across national and EU-level targets. Drawing on written questions from EP9, it offers novel insights into the relationship between populism and ethical claiming in the supranational arena. The results show that MEPs from populist parties ask more ethical questions than those from mainstream parties, supporting the idea that populists present themselves as guardians of moral integrity. MEPs from parties out of national office also ask more ethical questions than those with executive responsibilities. This suggests that parliamentary questions may serve opposition parties as a strategic tool to highlight what they perceive as unethical behaviour at relatively low political cost. These findings contribute to the literature on parliamentary questioning in the EP (Akbik and Migliorati 2023; Font and Pérez-Durán 2016) and national oppositional dynamics (Jensen *et al.* 2013; Proksch and Slapin 2011).

One of the main findings is that the relationship between populism and ethical claiming depends on whether a party is in or outside national office. Oppositional dynamics operate differently for populists and mainstream parties: MEPs from populist parties outside national government ask more ethical questions than their out-of-office mainstream counterparts. Populists appear more inclined to benefit from national opposition to reinforce their anti-elite stance. This leads us to ask how populists, once in government, resolve the trade-off between maintaining and moderating ethical claiming, engaging theoretically with the inclusion-moderation thesis. Our findings show that populist parties in office moderate their ethical questioning, bringing it closer to the level observed among MEPs from mainstream parties in office. Under governing responsibilities and potential coalition pressures, populists downplay their strategies of signalling ethical misconduct compared to when they are in opposition. This moderation is much more pronounced among populists than among mainstream MEPs. At the same time, robustness checks suggest that national party populism does not operate in isolation but is expressed within EP parliamentary groups that may reinforce or constrain ethical claiming. Our results should also be qualified as they may partly reflect selection effects: parties that enter office may already be more institutionally embedded or strategically cautious than those remaining in opposition, making it difficult to disentangle behavioural

change induced by governing from pre-existing characteristics. Accordingly, we interpret this moderation as reflecting both governing responsibilities and selection dynamics. Future longitudinal analyses are needed to separate these mechanisms. Our findings contribute to debates on the inclusion-moderation thesis (i.e. Akkerman *et al.* 2016; Mudde 2007; Zulianello 2025) and more broadly engage with research studying populists' rhetoric and behaviour (Font and Ares 2026; Gherghina and Mitru 2025; Gherghina and Pilet 2021; Stefanelli *et al.* 2025).

The results further show that populists and mainstream parties behave differently when targeting EU-level versus national-level actors. Differences are most pronounced when targeting EU-level actors. Mainstream parties, which typically hold pro-EU stances, show a lower inclination to engage in ethical claiming targeting EU-level actors, possibly to avoid raising issues that could portray the EU negatively. By contrast, populist parties have a stronger inclination to raise ethical claims directed at EU-level actors, consistent with populists' portrayal of the EU as an unaccountable and corrupt elite (Chiru and Wunsch 2023; De Vries 2018; Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017). Moreover, government status does not affect mainstream parties' ethical claiming, whereas populists reduce EU-targeted ethical claiming when their party holds office. When targeting national-level actors, differences between mainstream and populist legislators are smaller. Overall, these findings highlight the importance of distinguishing between target levels when analysing questioning activity in the EP.

Our study has limitations. First, the analysis focuses on a single EP legislative term, which restricts the possibility of capturing changes over time. Future studies could adopt a long-term approach and examine how these patterns evolve across parliamentary terms. Second, this study does not explore variation among populist parties, which calls for a more fine-grained comparative analysis of their motivations and strategies. Third, our study overlooks whether the party participates in a governing coalition and, if so, whether it holds a senior or junior position, factors that could affect how these parties behave in the EP. Fourth, our study highlights the importance of political groups, engaging with the idea that EP oversight functions as a tool of partisan differentiation (Guinaudeau and Costa 2022). Yet, it does not fully unpack how national-party populism interacts with political group dynamics to shape ethical questioning, which deserves further investigation. Finally, future research would benefit from investigating the supply side of public ethics, namely whether populist parties and legislators adhere to higher or lower ethical standards compared to mainstream ones, and the consistency between the supply and demand of public ethics.

This study has normative implications. The stronger emphasis placed by populist actors on ethical scrutiny may contribute to enhancing

oversight at the supranational level. At the same time, given populists' anti-elitism and Eurosceptic orientations, as well as their differentiated behaviour depending on government participation, ethical questioning, while remaining a core instrument of democratic scrutiny and an integral part of the EP's oversight function, might also reflect populist strategic goals that extend beyond accountability concerns. Understanding these dynamics in depth would reveal further implications of populism for EU democratic quality.

Abbreviations

CIs	Confidence Intervals
ECR	European Conservatives and Reformists
EP	European Parliament
EPG	European Political Group/s
EPP	European People's Party
EU	European Union
ID	Identity and Democracy
IRR	Incidence Rate Ratio/s
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MEPs	Members of the European Parliament
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
S&D	Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats

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