

## Summary

This research project is set in the context of the Committee of the Regions and the politics of European regional affairs. With a merely advisory function, the research was guided by the question, how the Committee of the Regions can increase its impact on the political system of the European Union. Party manifestos for the 2019 European Parliament elections were used to gain insights into the positions on European regional affairs of parties represented in the European Parliament. Specifically, it was found that party positions on European regional affairs tend to follow the general left-right spectrum and that the positions of parties on European regional affairs seem to mirror the topics deemed salient in national politics. By approaching the parties in the European Parliament that prioritise similar issues than the Committee of the Regions, it might be able to better influence the agenda of the European Parliament and, thus, increase its impact on the European political system in general.

## Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Literature Review .....	2
3. Methodology.....	4
4. Analysis .....	6
4.1. Wordfish .....	6
4.2. Post-Estimation .....	8
5. Discussion and Policy Recommendations .....	10
References .....	12
Appendix .....	14

## 1. Introduction

The *Committee of the Regions* (CoR) is one of the ten interinstitutional bodies of the *European Union* (EU) and was created in 1991. Its existence is based on two principles: *subsidiarity*<sup>1</sup> and representation. Additionally, the CoR should be viewed in the light of the *democratic deficit debate* which criticises EU institutions for lacking legitimacy and accountability (Vesnic-Alujevic/Nacarino 2012). Indeed, there is a link between this “legitimacy crisis” and the EU’s “push to involve a wide range of *policy recipients* in the policymaking process” (Carroll 2011: 342). The creation of the CoR thus institutionally illustrates the establishment of a federal, multi-level Union in which more competences are transferred to the EU. The functions of the CoR are listed as representative, advisory and symbolic: the first is reflected by the composition of the CoR, the other two functions aim at fulfilling the principle of subsidiarity. However, despite the observed federalisation of the EU, the CoR does not have a legislative function (ibid.).

It is within this framework that the project explores the CoR and the politics of regional affairs in the EU. The following research question provides guidance for our analysis: *How can the Committee of the Regions increase its impact on the political system of the EU by taking into account party stances on European regional affairs of parties elected in the European Parliament?* Consequently, the aim of this research is to analyse what topics parties elected to the *European Parliament* (EP) deem salient in European regional affairs. This is achieved by analysing data of manifestos for the 2019

---

<sup>1</sup> Art 5(3) Treaty on the European Union: The Union shall only act if the objectives of the proposed action cannot be reached by Member States alone.

EP elections with *Wordfish*<sup>2</sup> and a consecutive post-estimation. This research is conducted within the theoretical framework of the theory of *post-functionalism*, enabling the study to go beyond a functional lens and thereby allowing to focus on policy issues, distributional and identity effects (Hooghe et al. 2016; Marks et al. 2008).

The paper is structured as follows: first, a literature review provides the academic literature relevant to the project. The second section outlines the methodology, the third discusses the analysis. The paper is concluded by a discussion outlining policy-recommendations for the CoR.

## 2. Literature Review

The EU's multi-level governance structure involves a multitude of actors all with distinct political ideologies and agendas. How these often-competing interests interact within the multi-governance and electoral systems can be interpreted with the theory of post-functionalism. According to this theory, "governance [...] is determined not just by its functionality but by its emotional resonance. Multi-level governance within the state [...] evokes intense preferences not just for what it *does*, but for what it *is*" (Hooghe et al, 2016: 3). National, regional and local identities, thus, play a significant role in contrast to a sole focus on the extrinsic functions of governance.

As Hooghe/Marks (2009) demonstrate, the national level plays a significant role in European integration because European issues, including regional issues, are filtered through national institutions.

---

<sup>2</sup> Wordfish is a computer program written in *R* to extract political positions from text documents.

Consequently, regional authorities target national political actors to raise the salience of regional policy (Huelshoff 1994). National parties act as intermediaries between regions and EU institutions because they can mobilize on multiple electoral arenas (Braun/Schmitt 2018). As McElroy/Benoit (2011) showcase, all national parties can be consistently mapped along “two separable dimensions of policy, one related to economic left-right, and a second related to social liberalism versus moral conservatism” (ibid.: 157). Here, party positions on issues can be reasonably inferred based on political ideology (Marks et al. 2002). Cleavage theory dictates that parties cannot continuously reinvent themselves to suit the electorate. Rather, they operate under the constraints of *bounded rationality* forcing parties to simplify issues through the lens of political ideology (ibid.). Accordingly, the ideological positions of national parties have certain implications for the politicisation of regional issues. This leads to our first hypothesis (H1): *national party stances on European regional affairs follow the traditional left-right political spectrum.*

According to Toubreau/Wagner (2015), the standard left-right political dimensions can be further divided along cultural and economic lines (Toubreau/Wagner 2015). The ideological left’s emphasis on identity caters to regional actors with strong cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, support for regional identities may act to “contain pervasive nationalism” (ibid.: 6). Cultural conservative parties will by contrast disfavour regionalism because it may “erode national unity and territorial integrity” (ibid.: 2). However, parties from the economic right support regionalism because of its implications on the localized control of the allocation of resources, and therefore less federal government spending (ibid.). Accordingly,

our second hypothesis (H2) is as follows: *national party stances on European regional affairs mirror the topics deemed salient in national politics*. Therefore, the saliency of regional politics at the national level is often predicated on the issues and associations linked in-tandem with regional affairs. Identifying these dimensions on an issue-by-issue basis may reveal which parties regional actors themselves should target within the multi-governance structure of the EU.

At the European level, national parties organise themselves in party-groups based on ideological dimensions. Although, the presence of multiple actors within party-groups leads to the “problem of complexity” in EU policymaking (Benz/Eberlein 1999: 332), because of shared ideologies and the preference for “issue convergence”, national parties may have little incentive to engage in “strategic competition” over issues (i.e. regional issues) with aligned parties in their European party-groups (Marks et al. 2002: 588). This leads to the final hypothesis (H3): *national party stances on regional affairs from parties belonging to the same political group are compatible*.

### 3. Methodology

Stratified random sampling was applied to sample 35 national parties represented in the EP. Stratification was solely based on party-group affiliation. Furthermore, it was decided to drop all non-attached members and coalition-parties from the sampling procedure, as it deemed unrealistic to treat these as relatively homogeneous groups. Moreover, as collecting the sampled manifestos

proved challenging, the sampling procedure was repeated to replace those parties with missing manifestos. After this second round of sampling, 28 manifestos were obtained. As stratification was solely based on party-group affiliation, the sample was checked ex-post for its representativeness regarding nationality and party size. Eventually, the sample is found to be slightly biased towards parties from northern and western European states<sup>3</sup>.

Manifestos were translated by *Google Translate*'s inbuilt document function, yielding translations of relatively poor quality. Yet, this is not expected to severely bias our estimates as Wordfish will primarily centre around word-frequencies and not the context in which words are placed. The findings of de Vries et al. (2018) further strengthen our confidence in having translated the manifestos in a meaningful manner.

Translations were scanned for the occurrences of the following words:

*CoR, regio, sub(-)national, municipal, county/counties, provinc, subsidiarity, local, town, mayor, devolution, metropole, commune, district, urban, rural, city/cities, village.*

Chunks of text of approximately 30 to 70 words surrounding these search-terms were extracted from the translations<sup>4</sup>. Finally, it was

---

<sup>3</sup> For the sampling algorithm, the list of parties replaced and the balance check, see the repository created on GitHub: [https://github.com/Jacobs007/Policy-Incubator\\_European\\_Committee\\_of\\_the\\_Regions](https://github.com/Jacobs007/Policy-Incubator_European_Committee_of_the_Regions)

<sup>4</sup> The size of the chunk depends on the placement of the search-term in its paragraph, the size of a paragraph, the degree of clustering of search-terms within a paragraph.

checked whether the chunks applied the search terms in their appropriate context, i.e. European regional affairs. The remaining chunks of each party formed the corpus used in the analysis.

## 4. Analysis

This chapter will answer the three hypotheses introduced in section two. To do so, the Wordfish approach is supplemented by a post-estimation which further analyses the content of the retrieved text chunks.

### 4.1. Wordfish

The corpus was cleaned by removing punctuation and digits, lowercasing all text, removing stop words and stemming the words. The Wordfish method, introduced by Slapin/Proksch (2008), is aiming to estimate manifestos' positional similarity. A detailed explanation of the method is provided in the appendix. Yet, to do this, Wordfish requires a dimension along which it can place its estimates. The analysis as presented in this paper is benchmarked along the general political left-right dimension. To establish this dimension, party-groups were ranked from being generally most left-wing to being generally most right-wing, based on an updated version of the ranking by Benoit/Laver (2012). This yielded the following spectrum: *European United Left/Nordic Green Left* (GUE/NGL), *Greens/European Free Alliance* (Greens/EFA), *Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament* (S&D), *Renew Europe* (RE), *European People's Party* (EPP), *European Conservatives and Reformists* (ECR), *Identity and Democracy* (ID). Two benchmark parties from the extremes of this party-group spectrum were selected, based on the length of their corpus-



text. The latter is important because a sufficient number of words is required to accurately pinpoint the words a party uses. This resulted in the manifestos of *Parti du Travail de Belgique* and *Nieuw-Vlaamse Aliantie* (N-VA) serving as proxies for respectively the lower- and upper-boundary of our estimation. The N-VA belongs to the party-group ECR. It was decided not to use an arguably more right-wing ID-party as the upper-boundary, because of the party-group's association with populism as a more unpredictable form of politics (Pirro/Van Kessel 2017).

Figure 1 in the appendix contains the positional estimates and allows us to answer H1, that party positions on European regional affairs follow the general left-right spectrum. Given the restrictions described below, the position estimates for the analysed manifestos do indeed suggest that this is the case. All three parties of the most left-wing group are located on the left side of the spectrum. With one exception, this is also true for the Greens/EFA group. While the parties of the S&D, the RE and the EPP group are clustered across the middle of the spectrum, probably due to their centrist positions, the two ECR parties form the right end of the spectrum. Only the two parties of the ID group, located in the extreme left and the centre right do not fit into the concept. Again, this might be a characteristic of populist parties and in the case of the Finnish *Perussuomalaiset* is likely the result of a lack of data.

Figure 2 in the appendix expands these findings by illustrating what kind of parties discuss what topics in their manifestos. Topics that are deemed salient by *all* parties regardless of their political affiliation, relate to: agriculture, investment, economy, transport, health, social policy as well as the principle of subsidiarity. Topics that are deemed particularly salient by parties of the political *left* relate to:

environment, climate, emancipation, unemployment and cohesion. Similarly, topics that are deemed particularly salient by *right-wing* parties relate to: tourism, migration, security and language.

It should however be stressed that the estimation results are subject to three biases: First, not all manifestos are equally long or have the same writing style. For instance, some may repeat important words more often than others or write less concise. Both affect the importance ascribed to words. Second, the quality of the translation may differ between languages, and third, some manifestos contain no or very little relevant data to construct a positional estimate. This might be an indication for the party focusing little on regional affairs but can also be caused by the party having a short manifesto.

#### 4.2. Post-Estimation

It should be emphasised that Wordfish analyses the similarity in texts, which is different from analysing the content of texts. Although the analysis identified the topics parties in the EP deem salient in regional affairs, it was unable to draw any conclusions regarding the framing of these topics as well as the compatibility of parties' messages on the same topics. To satisfactorily answer the second and third hypothesis, a more thorough analysis of the retrieved text chunks is required.

The previous chapter has already laid the groundwork to answer H2 by identifying the most frequently mentioned topics of left- and right-wing parties. Expanding on this, H2 can indeed be confirmed: the positions of parties on European regional affairs do mirror the topics deemed salient in national politics. Just as on the national level, it is predominantly left-wing parties calling for redistribution.

In the context of European regional affairs this aims at creating similar living conditions across the EU to be achieved by better targeting or expanding cohesion and structural fund-programmes. Another topic occurring frequently on the left side of the spectrum is environmental policies, be it in the form of sustainable agriculture, decarbonisation or the contingency of structural funds on the fight against climate change. All but three left-wing parties mention this topic in their manifestos. On the other side of the spectrum, topics predominantly mentioned by right-wing parties, just as on the national level, are migration, security as well as identity politics. Additionally, the latter is featured most strongly in parties belonging to the far-right. Right-wing parties and the extreme-left are also more sceptical about the EU in general, and thus about the further concentration of competences on the European level.

Lastly, H3 is stating that party positions, on European regional affairs, from parties affiliated to the same political group are compatible. After analysing the data obtained from the 25 manifestos, this hypothesis can neither be confirmed nor rejected. First, a lack of data following a low number of hits in the obtained manifestos as well as a low number of obtained manifestos for some party-groups complicate a consistency check. The latter basically exclude the ID and the S&D group from the analysis. The remaining five groups, the EPP, the RE and the Greens/EFA, can be described as somewhat internally consistent in their topics as well as their demands. In all three groups, there are several topics mentioned by the majority of parties. Additionally, there is hardly any inconsistency in the messages of parties belonging to the same group. The degree of consistency is highest for the Greens/EFA group. While the parties of the ECR and the GUE/NGL groups can be found on the

right, respectively left side of the spectrum, the degree of consistency within the groups is relatively low as there is hardly any thematic overlap.

## 5. Discussion and Policy Recommendations

This research project explored the CoR and the politics of regional affairs in the EU along the research question: *How can the Committee of the Regions increase its impact on the political system of the EU by taking into account party stances of parties elected in the European Parliament on European regional affairs?* To summarise its main findings:

- Party positions on European regional affairs tend to follow the general left-right spectrum.
- The positions of parties on European regional affairs seem to mirror the topics deemed salient in national politics.
- It can neither be confirmed nor rejected whether parties affiliated to the same party-groups express compatible opinions on regional affairs.

Yet, it is important to note the methodological limitations. First, the analysis is only conducted with a small and somewhat biased sample. Second, not all manifestos might have been translated equally well and vary in length. Third, the list of *terms* used to extract relevant text from the translated manifestos is somewhat arbitrary. Finally, two manifestos did not yield any hit on the list of search-terms and arguably do not focus on regional affairs. Moreover, following the limited sample size, the consistency-check to answer the third hypothesis proved difficult and led to an inconclusive answer.

Despite the above limitations we are confident in having obtained the topics EP parties deem salient in European regional affairs and would issue the CoR with the following recommendations to improve its performance:

Considering the political priorities of the CoR, it would benefit from approaching those actors in the EP that prioritise similar issues. By doing so, the CoR might be able to better influence the agenda of the EP and, thus, increase its impact on the European political system in general. Examples of strategies that could embody this objective are the organisation of events such as seminars in cooperation with the respective parties, hosting informal meetings with the respective parties and pursuing common media campaigns.

To specify our findings:

- The CoR is expected to be particularly successful in the above if focussing on those issues that are outlined as being deemed salient by a broad range of parties within the EP: energy and the general strengthening of the principle of subsidiarity.
- Issues that are found salient by left-wing parties: increased redistribution between regions, infrastructure and environmental protection.
- Issues that are found salient by right-wing parties: migration, security and identity.

Although beyond the scope of this analysis, the fact that members of the EP and the CoR stem from the same political parties might also open avenues for a close bond of cooperation. Any attempt to strengthen this bond is to be encouraged from the perspective of CoR and can serve as a starting point for further research.

## References

- Benoit, Kenneth; Laver, Michael (2012): The Dimensionality of Political Space: Epistemological and Methodological Considerations. In: *European Union Politics*, 13(2): 194-218.
- Benz, Arthur; Eberlein, Burkard (1999): The Europeanization of Regional Politics: Patterns of Multi-Level Governance. In: *Journal of European Public Policy*, 6(2): 329-348.
- Braun, Daniela; Schmitt, Herrmann (2018): Different Emphases, Same Positions? The Election Manifestos of Political Parties in the EU Multilevel Electoral System Compared. In: *Party Politics*.
- Carroll, William (2011): The Committee of the Regions: A Functional Analysis of the CoR's Institutional Capacity. In: *Regional & Federal Studies* 21(3): 341-354.
- De Vries, Erik; Schoonvelde, Martijn; Schumacher, Gijs (2018): No Longer Lost in Translation: Evidence that Google Translate Works for Comparative Bag-of-Words Text Applications. In: *Political Analysis*, 26(4): 417-430.
- Hooghe, Liesbet; Marks, Gary (2009): A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus. In: *British Journal of Political Science*, 39(1): 1-23.
- Hooghe, Liesbet; Marks, Gary; Schakel, Arjen; Osterkatz, Sandra; Niedzwiecki, Sara; Shair-Rosenfield, Sarah (2016). *Measuring regional authority: A Postfunctionalist Theory of Governance*, Volume I. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Huelshoff, Michael (1994): Domestic Politics and Dynamic Issue Linkage: A Reformulation of Integration Theory. In: *International Studies Quarterly*, 38(2): 255-279.
- Marks, Gary; Hooghe, Liesbet; Schakel, Arjan (2008). Measuring Regional Authority. In: *Regional & Federal Studies*, 18(2-3): 111-121.
- Marks, Gary; Wilson, Carole; Ray, Leonard (2002): National Political Parties and European Integration. In: *American Journal of Political Science*, 46(3): 585-594.
- McElroy, Gail; Benoit, Kenneth (2012): Policy Positioning in the European Parliament. In: *European Union Politics*, 13(1): 150-167.
- Pirro, Andrea; Van Kessel, Stijn (2017): United in opposition? The populist radical right's EU-pessimism in times of crisis. In: *Journal of European Integration*, 39(4): 405-420.
- Slapin, Jonathan; Proksch, Sven-Oliver (2008): A Scaling Model for Estimating Time-Series Party Positions from Texts. In: *American Journal of Political Science*, 52(3): 705-722.
- Toubeau, Simon; Wagner, Markus (2015): Explaining Party Positions on Decentralization. In: *British Journal of Political Science*, 45(1): 97-119.
- Vesnic-Alujevic, Lucia; Nacarino, Rodrigo (2012): The EU and Its Democratic Deficit: Problems and (Possible) Solutions. In: *European View*, 11(1): 63-70.

## Appendix

### Mechanism Wordfish Estimation

It is assumed that the likelihood of a manifesto “ $i$ ” mentioning a word  $y_j$ , follows a Poisson distribution,  $y_{ij} \sim \text{Poisson}(\lambda_{ij})$ . The likelihood of observing  $y_{ij}$  a given number of times, is then estimated as in equation 1. Where  $\lambda_{ij}$  is the parameter to be estimated by Wordfish based on the number of times a word is mentioned in the provided benchmark manifestos. Or alternatively phrased, an expected number of times a word occurs,  $\lambda_{ij}$ , is estimated by Wordfish based on the manifesto’s similarity with the provided benchmark manifestos.

$$P(y_{ij}) = \frac{\lambda_{ij}^{y_{ij}} e^{-\lambda_{ij}}}{y_{ij}!} \quad (1)$$

The expected number of times a word occurs is based on the manifesto’s similarity with the benchmark manifestos and is estimated with the model outlined in equation 2.

$$\lambda_{ij} = e^{(\alpha_i + \psi_j + \beta_j * \omega_i)} \quad (2)$$

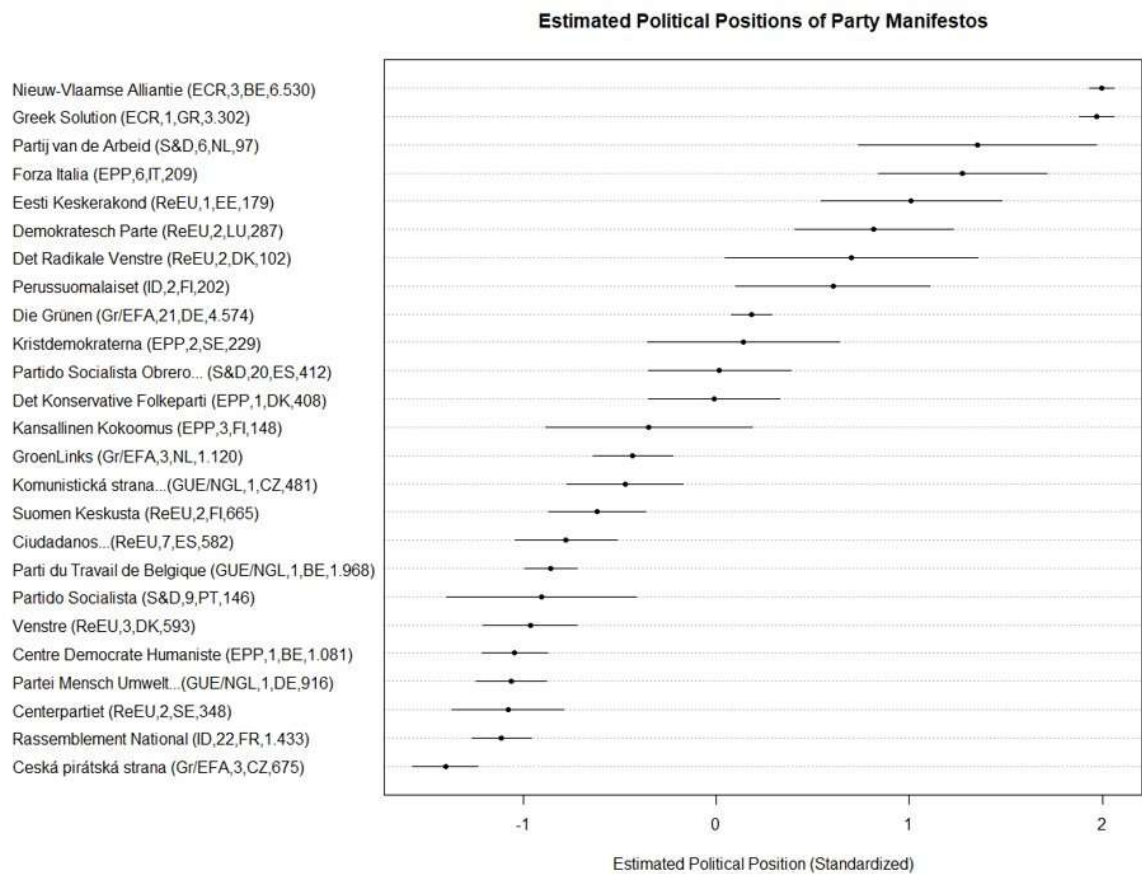
$\alpha_i$  is an actor fixed-effect,  $\psi_j$  is a word fixed-effect,  $\beta_j$  is a word-specific weight capturing word  $j$ ’s importance for discriminating between positions and  $\omega_i$  is the estimate of the manifesto’s ideological position.

*For further reference:*

Proksch, Sven-Oliver; Slapin, Jonathan (2009): Wordfish Manual. Version 1.3. URL: [http://www.wordfish.org/uploads/1/2/9/8/12985397/wordfish\\_manual.pdf](http://www.wordfish.org/uploads/1/2/9/8/12985397/wordfish_manual.pdf) (24/03/2020).



# Figures



**Figure 1:** The information in parenthesis relates respectively to: the party-group affiliation, the number of seats in the European parliament the party holds, the nation the party stems from and the number of words in the text incorporated into the corpus).

