***Mr. P Visits Strasburg: An Investigation of the Democratic Deficit in the European Union[[1]](#footnote-1)\****

**Fall 2020 QMSS Thesis**

**Abstract**

The existence of a democratic deficit in the European Union (EU) has been a matter of controversy in academia, in the media and has very real implications for policymakers in Europe. Are European citizens actually represented by the EU? If not, then what drives the voting behaviors of the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), the only democratically elected officials that make up the EU government? Using a Bayesian approach to Multilevel-Regression and Poststratification to estimate voter preferences at the subnational level, this paper investigates the democratic deficit in the European Union by correlating preferences with MEP roll call votes in a novel setting, and finds that …

Gabriel Gilling – [gabriel.gilling@columbia.edu](mailto:gabriel.gilling@columbia.edu)

Advisor: Prof. Justin Phillips, Department of Political Science

**I . Introduction**

1. **The History and the Structure of the European Parliament**

As the Second World War concluded, European leaders gathered to discuss the vision of a united and peaceful continent that would withstand the temptations of isolated and nationalistic movements that had ravaged the continent – and much of the rest of the world, for more than four decades. That vision initially would be achieved by way of economic integration and the creation of an integrated and common market where goods and people could cross borders freely. As such, the 1951 Treaty of Paris established the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) with six founding members, Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and perhaps most importantly, France and West Germany – the establishment of the integrated economic market was designed in large part to keep the two countries from going to war again.

Although a fledging instance of supranationalism, the ECSC’s structure would lay the foundations of the European Union (EU). For instance, the ECSC had a consultative body called the Common Assembly, which would later become the European Parliament. Although it had no legislative powers at the time, its function was largely to provide a forum where members could discuss and advise the nascent institutions, its body was drawn from the countries’ members of their respective national parliaments, thus creating a sense of dual - national and European - identity for the parliamentarians. As the European project grew, the Common Assembly underwent several transformations, renaming itself the European Parliamentary Assembly in 1958 and finally called itself the European Parliament (EP) in 1962[[2]](#footnote-2). As the European Parliament gained powers, such as budget setting (1970) or making ascension to the European Union subject to its approval (1975), its MEPs (Members of the European Parliament) held a dual mandate, as they were still being drawn from national parliaments[[3]](#footnote-3). This changed in 1979, when the first direct European elections were held and 410 MEPs were elected.[[4]](#footnote-4)\* As the E.U. expanded in the following years, so did the size of the EP: the 2019 elections saw the swearing in of 751 MEPs, although this number has been reduced to 705 after the departure of the United Kingdom in 2020. MEPs typically run on a party ticket, with national political parties forming European-wide coalitions. For instance, the largest group at the EP since 1999 is the European People’s Party, a center-right coalition made up of national parties such as Germany’s *Christian-Democratic Union*, France’s *Les Republicains*, Italy’s *Forza Italia* and so forth, covering all 26 member states. Elections are held every 5 years and have more then 400 million eligible voters, representing the largest transnational elections in the world.

The EP is one of the two legislative bodies of the EU, representing the interest of its citizens, while the Council of the EU represents the interests of the national governments, and is made up of ministers from the member states. Both bodies receive legal proposals from the European Commission (EC) and typically engage in a back-and-forth, amending the laws before agreeing to and voting on a final version. Other functions of the EP include voting on international agreements, deciding on enlargement, allocating the budget, as well as a plethora of other supervisory and advisory functions[[5]](#footnote-5).

However, there is a substantial distance between the aforementioned functions as they are laid out theoretically, and how affairs are conducted in reality. As the next section explains, a major criticism of the EU stems from the EP’s perceived “democratic deficit”: flaws in its structural relationship with the other EU institutions and confusion around the nature of the MEPs’ representation of the EU citizens.

1. **The “Democratic Deficit”**

Since its inception, the European project has received much praise. Its goal, to make war between France and Germany “not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible” as put by the French Foreign Minister Schuman is very much an ongoing success. The creation of the world’s largest single market, as well as the adoption of a single currency (the Euro), has fostered unprecedented economic growth for both the European continent and the rest of the world, by simplifying rules, harmonizing standards and stimulating international trade and investment. The ascension of Eastern European states after the end of the Cold War, conditional on democratic and social reform, has pushed these states to adopt more robust democratic institutions and to reform their ailing economies[[6]](#footnote-6). Pundits and academics alike have lauded legislation such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) for establishing frameworks and in-depth discussions around the proper protection of citizen’s online data[[7]](#footnote-7), as countries around the world have since passed similar laws.

On the other hand, there has been substantial interrogation and debate around a perceived lack of democracy in the EU. Politicians and the media alike were bewildered when the 2005 Treaty of Rome, which intended on establishing an EU wide constitution, was rejected by voters in France and in the Netherlands, only to be replaced and ratified by the 2007 Treaty of Lisbon, this time by national parliamentarians, fully bypassing national electorates[[8]](#footnote-8). Ironically, opponents of European integration have been a major force in the EP, especially in the last two decades. They argue that the EU lacks democratic legitimacy, and that the power balance between the EU and national governments is a zero-sum game, favoring the latter. These ideas were taken to their paroxysm in 2016 as politicians and voters in favor of Brexit, the divorce between Great Britain and the EU, heavily relied on them to gain legitimacy and ultimately win the vote.[[9]](#footnote-9) As of 2019, over 25% of the MEPs in the EP’s 9th Term are Euro-skeptics.

The debate around the democratic deficit has not spared academia either. Katz notes that a common criticism lies in the fact that none of the EU’s institution – aside from the EP – are democratically elected, and are as such accountable. In fact, the EP itself in inadequate in holding the EC accountable as well, although it is one of its principal missions. A major issue Katz points out is that there are several different conceptions of what democratic representation actually means within the EU member-states: obviously enough, it is nearly impossible to achieve proper representation without an agreement on what democratic representation actually entails[[10]](#footnote-10).

Hix and Follesdal, in response to Marjone and Moravcsik (who have argued that there is no democratic deficit in the EU) reiterate that while there is no single definition of what constitutes the democratic deficit, five main claims stand out.[[11]](#footnote-11) The first two claims revolve around the EP’s relative weakness: its inability to hold the executive branch of the EU accountable, implying a shift in power away from the legislative branch towards executive branches of government. Another claim is that the psychological “distance” between voters and the EU is too high, and the EU’s structure is too byzantine[[12]](#footnote-12)\* for voters to properly understand why or what they’re voting for when they elect MEPs.

On the other hand, Bolt finds that satisfaction with democracy in the EU is actually quite high, and is positively correlated with a respondent’s knowledge of the EU.[[13]](#footnote-13) However, this only reinforces the previous claim that appreciation for the democratic institutions of the EU are intimately tied to it’s the understanding of its functions and structure – something that is anything but a given.

Discussions about the institutional balance of power in the EU or its psychological perception is beyond the scope of this paper, but the other sets of arguments are compelling. First, the authors lay out the claim European elections have in reality very little to do with Europe. Not only do the policy proposals put forward by European parties typically have very little to do with the EU itself, the elections themselves are fought on domestic issues and act as a mechanism to punish incumbent parties if they disappoint their electorates.[[14]](#footnote-14) Second, the authors contend that European integration has produced a “policy drift” which has pushed policies away from voters’ ideal preferences: “The EU adopts policies that are not supported by a majority of citizens in many or even most Member States. Governments are able to undertake policies at the European level that they cannot pursue at the domestic level, where they are constrained by parliaments, courts and corporatist interest group structures. […] Concentrated interests such as business interests and multinational firms have a greater incentive to organize at the European level than diffuse interests, such as consumer groups or trade unions […] skewing EU policy outcomes more towards the interests of the owners of capital than is the case for policy compromises at the domestic level in Europe. “[[15]](#footnote-15)

This paper will focus on this last issue. Although the authors stipulate that voter preferences are much different that the policies that are voted on at the EP, little research has been conducted to 1) systematically analyze voter preferences in the EU and 2) correlate them with MEP voting at the EP. While there are a plethora of voter preferences and associated legislation to choose from, this paper will focus on the issue of environmental regulation, thanks to the abundance of surveys and EP voting over the last twenty years, as well as heightened discussion in both the media and academia, making it a particularly productive field.

1. **Environmentalism in the E.U. and at the European Parliament**

**II. Empirical Framework and Literature Review**

1. **Understanding voter preferences**

This paper makes use of a statistical modeling technique called Multilevel Regression and

Postratification (MRP) to build robust estimates of voter preferences around survey questions regarding the environment. Political Scientists often turn to surveys to estimate public preferences because understanding preferences is essential to understanding how a democratic system functions. If elected officials act in the name of their constituents, then they need to know what their constituents’ preferences are in order to act accordingly. Conversely, the public may elect politicians because those politicians offer the platforms “closest” to their preferences.

While this paper does not address that issue in particular, better understanding citizens’ preferences is invaluable regardless. Even if we cannot ascertain the causal direction between voter preferences and the political behavior of their elected officials, it is important for us to know if those preferences are at least mirrored to some extent by politicians. At the heart of the controversy lies the question: are European citizens actually represented by the EU? If not, then what drives the voting behaviors of the MEPs, the only democratically elected officials in the EU government? These questions have important implications, but also present an opportunity to better understand the link between citizen preferences and the behavior of their elected officials.

There are several methods that academics and researchers have used over the years to analyze survey data. The most common, and the easiest to implement, is called disaggregation, which consists of tallying the average response for a question (i.e. the support for a certain policy) for the big unit under study: if 50% of respondents in the Ile-de-France region support higher taxes, then that region’s support is coded as 50%.[[16]](#footnote-16) However, this method has significant shortcomings, especially when dealing with low sample sizes. Further, Lax and Phillips note that disaggregation is less likely to be biased when estimating opinion that is stable over time. Unfortunately, the most interesting issues to study are often those subjective to controversy or shifting attitudes over time. Perhaps the biggest shortcoming with disaggregation is the potential of calculating biased estimates due to non-representative samples, which can over or under represent certain key demographic groups[[17]](#footnote-17). As we will see, MRP’s methodology allows it to overcome many of these problems and achieve robust estimates instead.

MRP is a method that can be used to estimate subnational (or regional) preferences using national survey data, by employing random (mixed) effects which perform partial pooling: information from ‘small’ units (such as individual voters) that reside within ‘big’ units (congressional districts, U.S. states, European countries) is shared within the big units in the sample in order to increase the accuracy of the model fit.

The idea is that survey respondents - the ‘small’ units - have idiosyncratic features unique to the particular ‘big’ unit they reside in, but also have characteristics with other similar ‘small’ units across all of the ‘big’ units in the sample[[18]](#footnote-18). For example, a 20-year-old university educated male in the Ile-de-France region of France will have unique characteristics that he shares with other individuals living in that region, but will also have shared features with 20-year-old educated males in the London region of the U.K. and the North-West region of Italy. Therefore, survey responses are modeled as a function of demographic factors (age, ethnicity, education) and geographic factors. The first stage of the analysis consists of fitting a multilevel regression on a survey response – for instance support for a certain policy (for increasing fines for big polluters) using individual level predictors for the ‘small’ unit and predictors for the ‘bigger’ units. This methodology is also called “partial pooling” because it pools a part (but not all) of the estimates for the small units towards the group mean within the big unit.

The choice of predictors for the bigger units depends on the question under study. For instance, a model analyzing survey responses on attitudes towards abortion might want to include the share of Catholic individuals in the states under study, and a question asking about attitudes towards environmental regulations might want to include the percentage of employment tied to the fossil fuel industry in the states under study.

Once the initial model is fit, the poststratification step consists of using census data to tabulate the actual distribution of the individual level predictors in the population (i.e. counting all of the 20-year-old university educated males in all regions, and then all of the 20-year-old university educated females and so on, for all combination of categories included in the model). These distributions are used as weights to estimate the attitude for the ‘big’ units under study.[[19]](#footnote-19)

While MRP functions best when it uses nationally representative data, it can also perform well when dealing with non-representative surveys thanks to the use of actual demographic composition given by the census.[[20]](#footnote-20) What’s more, MRP allows the estimation of big units that are not available in the sample. In the United States for instance, it is often the case that states such as Alaska or Wyoming are not sampled. In Europe, places like Corsica or Northern Island are also left out of major surveys, such as the Eurobarometer. MRP corrects for that by “projecting” the demographic and geographic effects obtained in the first stage onto the actual demographic composition of those states, further enhancing the estimates with the geographic predictors the researcher has access to.

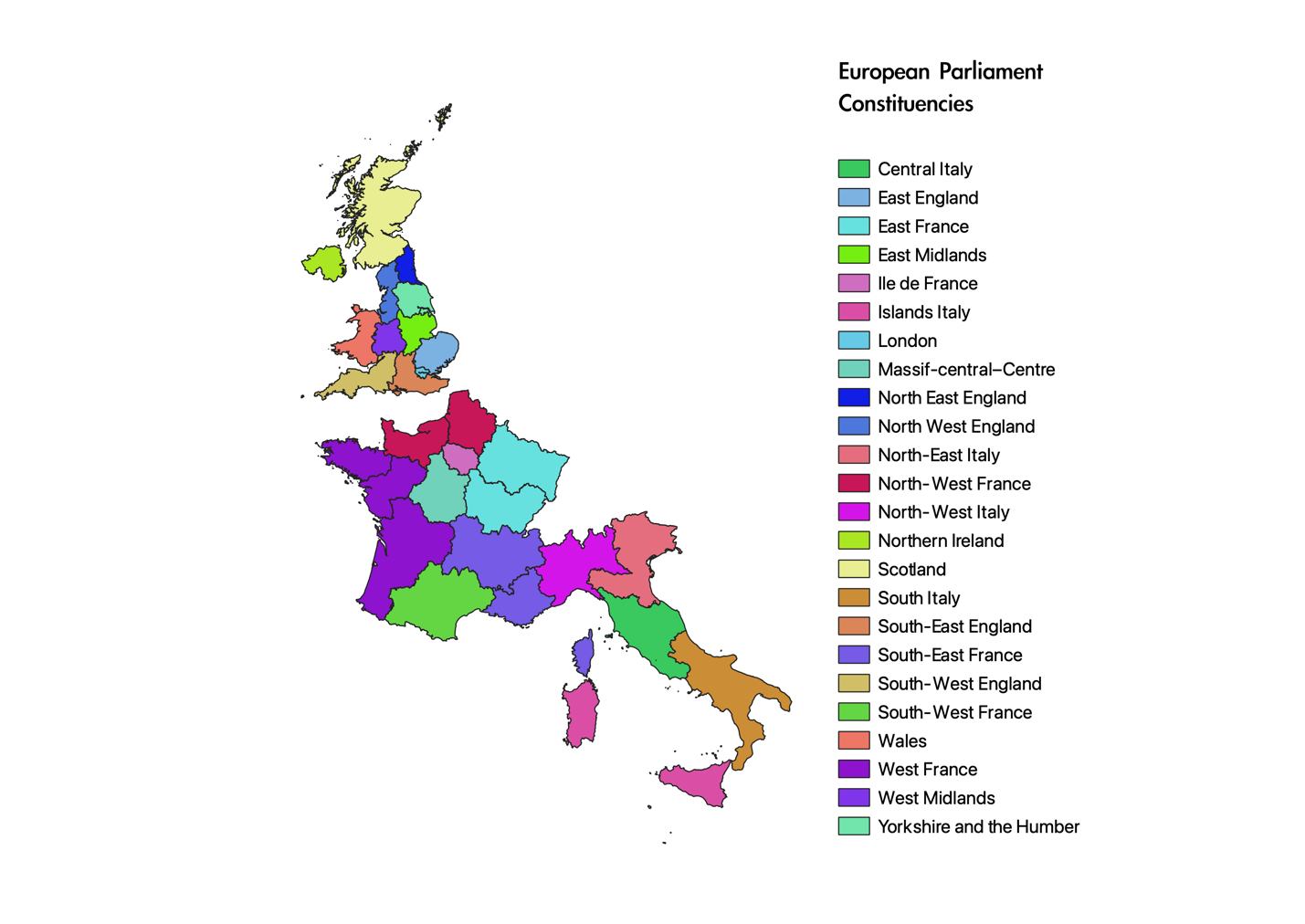
While MRP has been extensively used to analyze and understand voter preferences[[21]](#footnote-21) and then compare those preferences to the voting behavior of elected officials[[22]](#footnote-22) or by the patterns of rulings given by federal judges[[23]](#footnote-23), the brunt of the research has been applied to the U.S. – where a common language (which simplifies polling and surveying), streamlined political representation across states and congressional districts, as well as census taking, make implementing MRP relatively straightforward. In Europe, MRP has been used to predict political outcomes such as the Brexit vote[[24]](#footnote-24) but has not been used to: 1) model European preferences using a Bayesian framework and 2) correlate the findings with the voting behavior of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs).

With Europe as the geographic area under study, research has so far focused on assessing the quality of predictions produced by MRP by comparing these sub-national level estimates with “true” values produced by the few surveys that do measure sub-national opinions. For instance, using Eurobarometer polling data, Todshov finds that MRP usually performs well in replicating “true” preferences, but that “the approach is less capable of reconstructing the relative rankings of the country means and hitting the range of plausible values of the individual state means”[[25]](#footnote-25). He also highlights the importance of including country level predictors in the multilevel models. Lipp and Schraff conduct a similar study, this time comparing the performance of different methods and algorithms, including disaggregation, “classical” MRP, synthetic MRP (as developed by Leemann and Westfallen)[[26]](#footnote-26), and Bayesian Additive Regression Trees (BART). They conclude that synthetic MRP and BART perform best.[[27]](#footnote-27) However, their analysis relies on Frequentist point estimation, while this paper augments the analysis with the inclusion of priors, as well as deriving the full posterior distribution of the estimated preferences by using the Stan programming language.[[28]](#footnote-28)

**b. Representation**

There are two main ways that countries can send elected representatives to the E.U. Parliament: by electing national or regional representatives.[[29]](#footnote-29) In the former, citizens cast their votes for delegates representing a political party and the nationwide results are aggregated and tallied using proportional representation. In the latter, votes are split between electoral constituencies - voters cast ballots for political parties represented at the regional level. My work will focus on the latter case in order to give a form of external validity to the work done by Lax & Phillips, where individual attitudes were correlated with U.S. Senate roll call votes[[30]](#footnote-30). Consequently, I will assess the subnational preferences of E.U. citizens in 3 countries that have regional constituencies at the E.U. Parliament: France (before 2019), the United Kingdom (before Brexit in 2016) and Italy. Although there are other countries, such as Poland and Belgium, that also have regional level representation at the EP, I have chosen the 3 aforementioned countries for ease: their constituencies are nearly equivalent to the pre-established Nomenclature of Territorial Units for States (NUTS) and required minimal recoding and data wrangling. Future research should take into the account the other countries.

Map 1 below shows the 24 constituencies in my sample.



Map 1: 24 European Parliament Constituencies Under Study

Research on the effect of electoral subdivisions on MEP voting patterns has been lacking, and the field is likely to offer some invaluable insight on how MEPs represent their constituencies. Using MEP survey data, Bowler and Farrell observe that in general voters served by MEPs at the constituency level are better represented than those represented by national MEPs.[[31]](#footnote-31) Assessing the effects of electoral rules on representative roles, Farrell and Scully argue that two main components are responsible for much of the influence: *ballot structure* and *magnitude*. Ballot structure distinguishes between 3 types of representation: “open”, “ordered” and “closed”. To paraphrase: “The open systems – in which the candidates’ electoral fates are affected by their personal vote-chasing activities – are used in nine cases […] At the other extreme, closed systems – in which candidates’ electoral fates are determined by their party list placement – are used in eight member states. Finally, there are ordered list systems, in which there is some limited scope for candidates to improve their list placement through personal votes. These are used in nine member states”.[[32]](#footnote-32) The three countries under study have variation in their ballot structure: France and the U.K. have closed and party-based systems, while Italy has a mix of open and ordered list systems. They conclude that candidates elected on open lists are much more responsive to their constituents than others stemming from party-based list, with a notable exception for the U.K., despite being on a closed list, the countries’ own parliamentary system and political culture have made British MEPs much more responsive to their constituents than others. On the other hand, magnitude did not have a significant effect. However, Farrell and Scully use MEP survey questions as their dependent variable to assess how closely MEPs “care” about their constituents (how often the MEPs visits their constituents, whether they have offices in their constituencies and so forth). While they do not seek to assess the relationship between voter preferences and voting behavior, their segmentation of electoral rules gives us useful clues to pursue our analysis.

Other lines of analysis have focused on other factors, such as the role that political parties play in determining variation in representation at the EP. Marsh and Norris note that traditional models of representation which focus on the “matching” between policy demand and supply lead to the understanding of MEPs as representatives of their parties first and foremost.[[33]](#footnote-33) However, the reality is much different because political parties do not have concrete, policy-driven platforms. Furthermore, there is such a concentrated degree of elite consensus around certain issues, such as furthering European concentration and monetary policy that there is little variation amongst party level policy supply. The authors conclude that there is effectively no linkage between the voters and MEPs, and this is reflected in the paltry turnouts at EP elections. Other papers have discussed the role played by Eurosceptics at the EP

As such this paper will fill substantive, geographical and methodological gaps around the democratic deficit and the modeling of public opinion and its relationship with elected official voting behavior.

**c. Hypotheses:**

This paper will test the following two hypotheses that were identified as being plausible in

the literature review.

*H0: There is a positive and significant relationship between voter preferences and MEP preferences.*

First, we should expect constituent level voter preferences and MEP preferences to be positively correlated and statistically significant. Although severe doubt has been cast on MEPs’ ability to represent their constituents overall, previous research has shown a tendency for higher representation at regional levels.

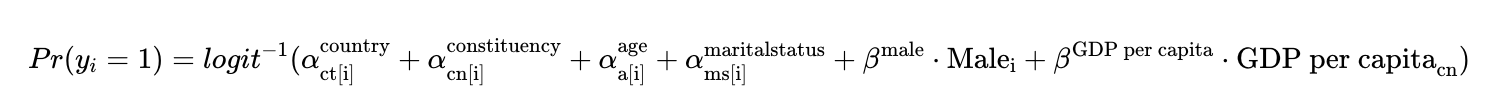
*H1: Italy and the U.K. have a higher degree of positive correlation between voter preferences and MEP preferences than France does.*

As identified by Bowler and Farrell, Italy and the U.K. should have a higher degree of positive correlation between voter and MEP preferences, because Italy has an open and ordered electoral system which allows voters to choose and order candidates that are more likely to represent their interests, while the U.K. has a culture and tradition of political representation that has fostered deeper connections between MEPs and their constituents. On the other hand, France has a party-based and closed representation system, where voters are more likely to vote for MEPs representing parties they are ideologically aligned with.[[34]](#footnote-34)

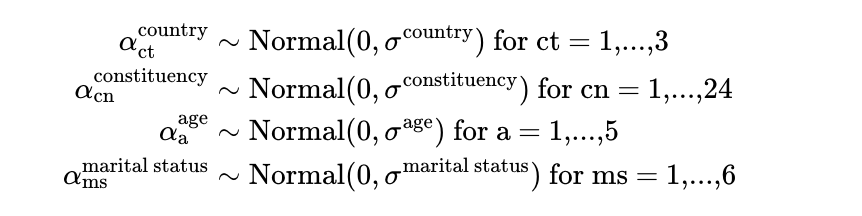
**III. Data and Methodology**

As explained earlier, MRP is divided into two steps.

1. **Fitting Survey response models**

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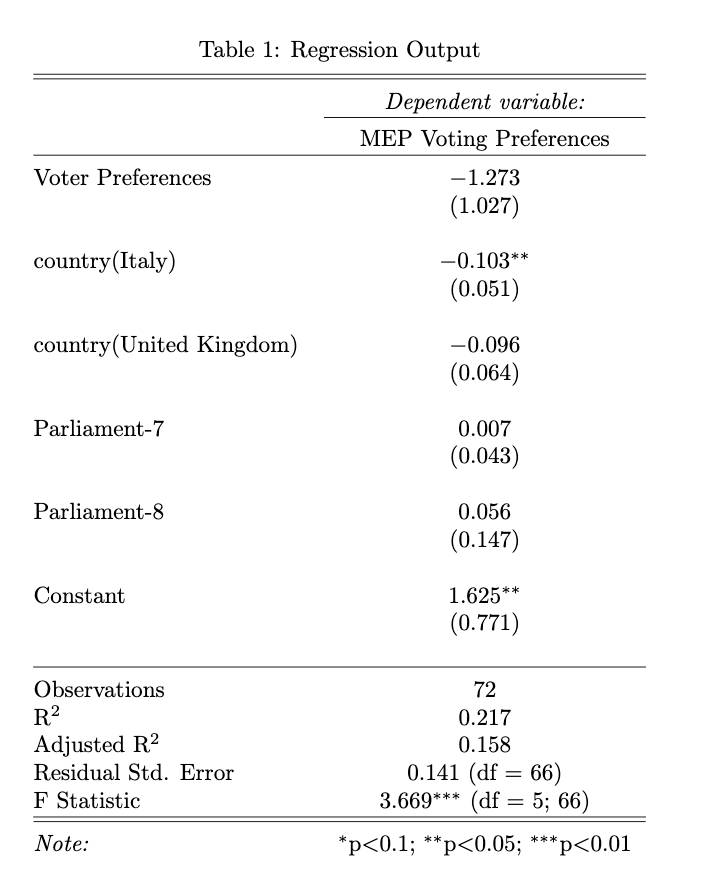
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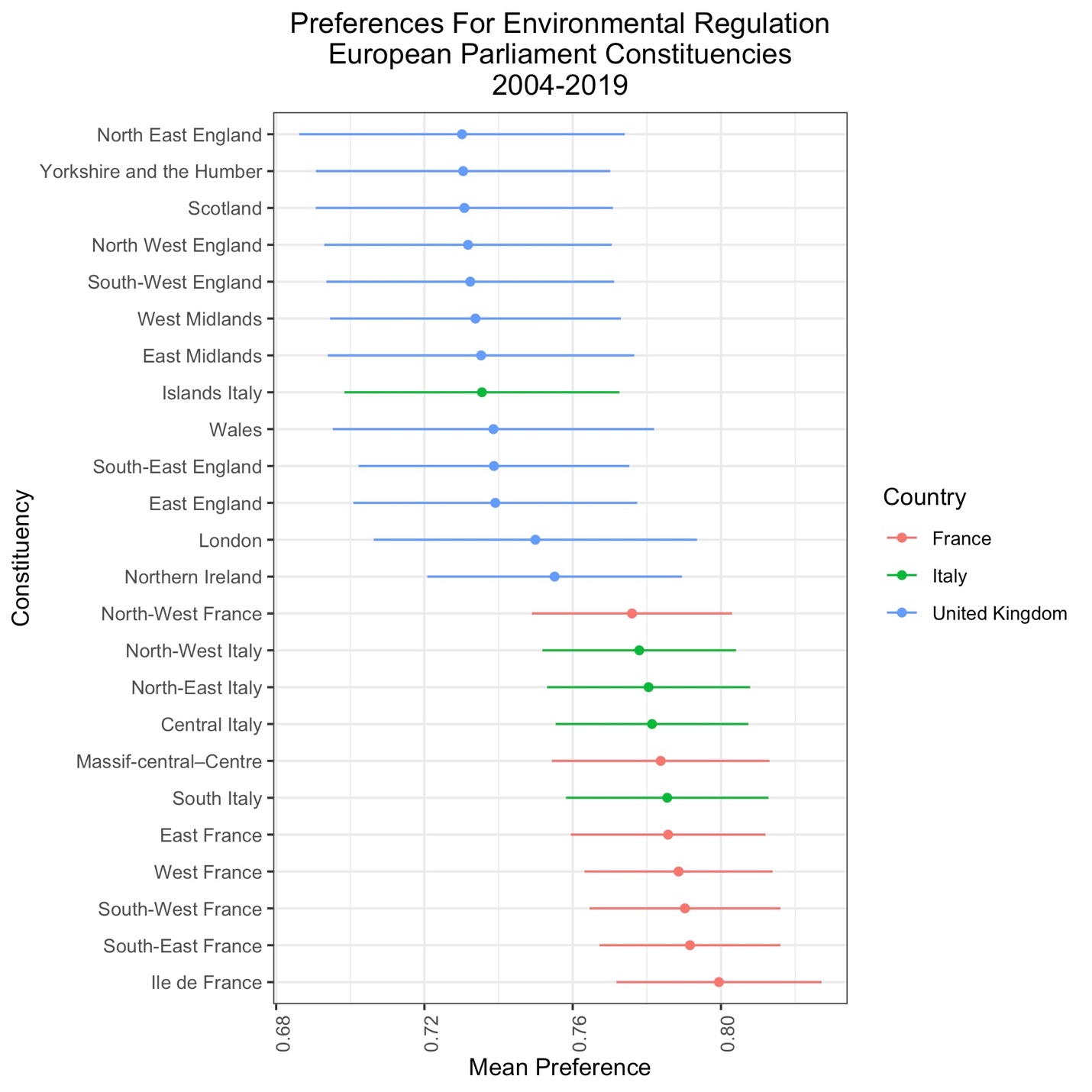
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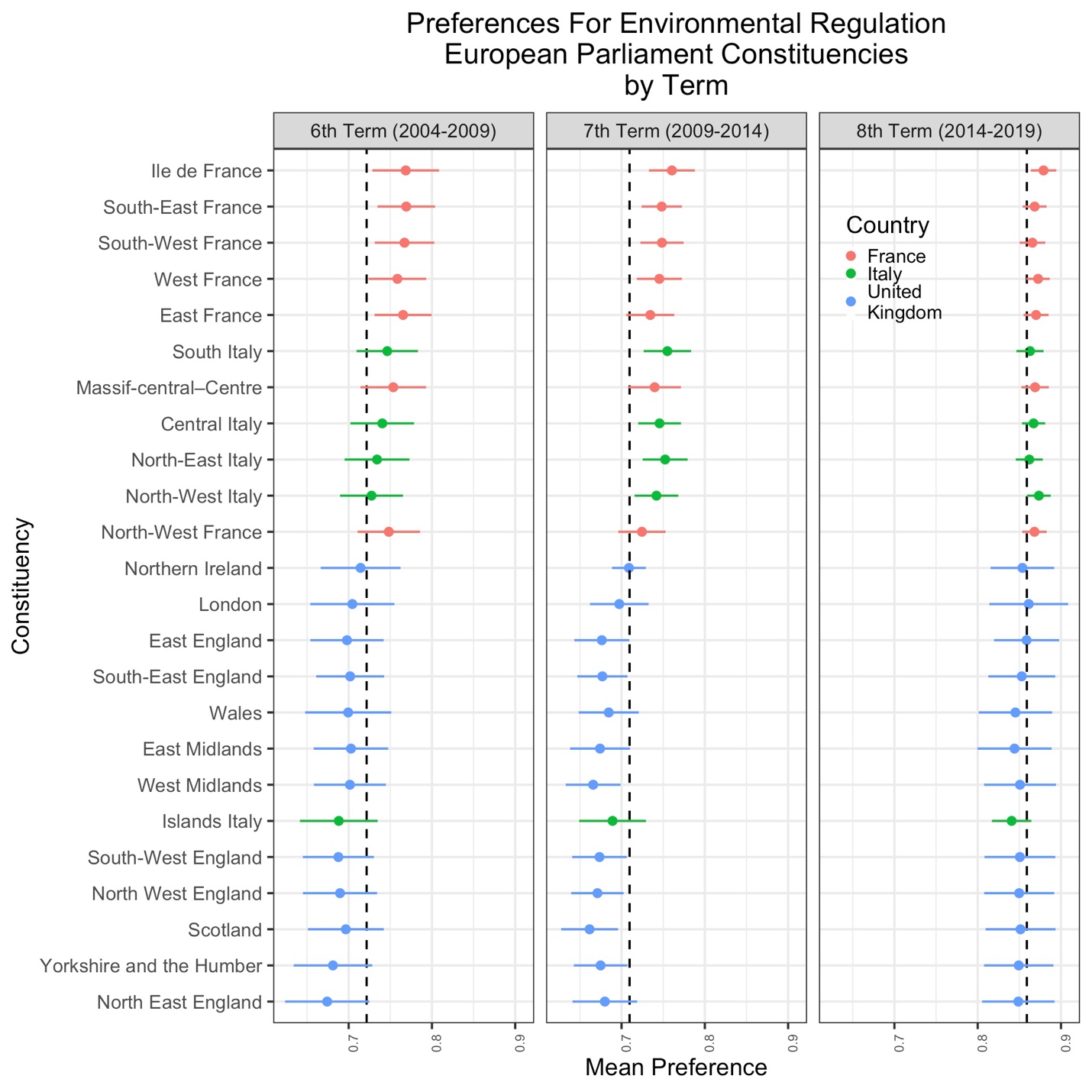
After conducting the preference estimation using MRP, the second step of the analysis will be to correlate them with roll call votes at the E.U. Parliament.

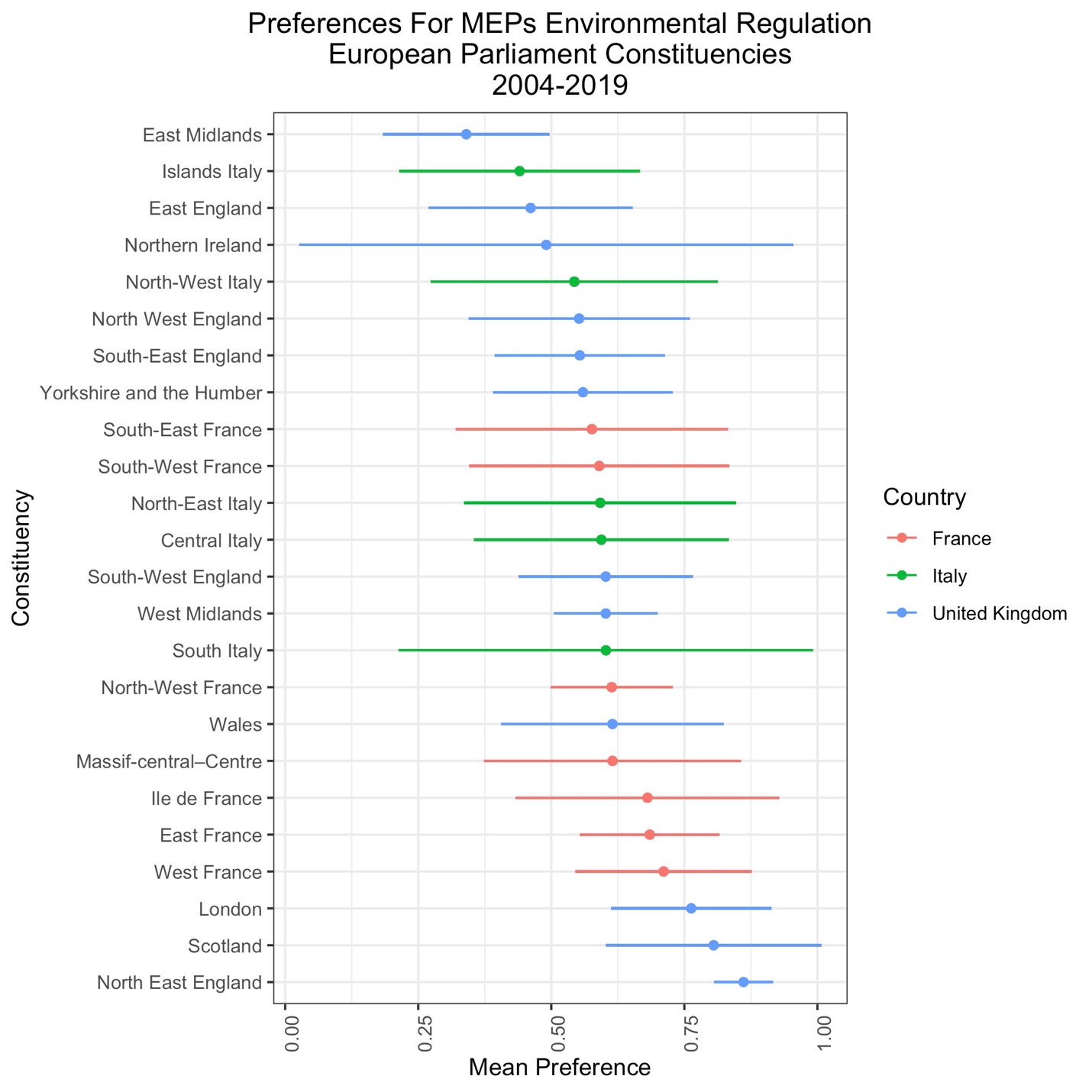
1. **Poststratification**

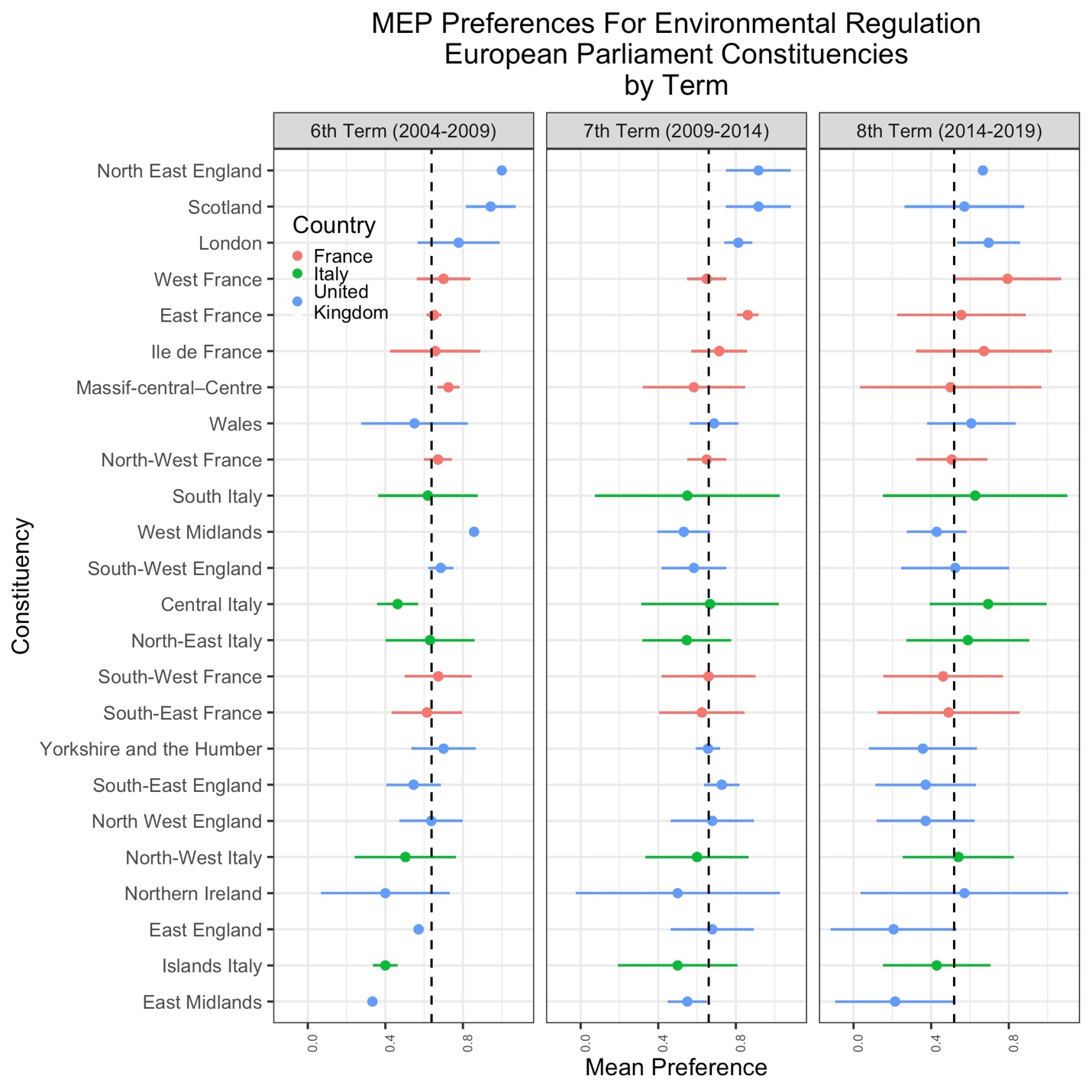
**IV. Results**

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**V. Discussion / Caveats**

Caveats:

* Methodological
  + Questions don’t necessarily == policy – will benefit from IRT
  + Uneven questions asked, not same questions every survey
  + Other policy areas?
  + Using past election results at the regional level as a constituent level predictor
  + Using respondent PID
* Substantive
  + Might not even be EP’s primary function
  + Issue salience: how does the environment weights when electing officials compared to other policy areas?

**VI. Conclusion**

**ANNEX: DATA SOURCES AND MODEL CONSTRUCTION**

1. **Survey data for the target countries** (preference estimation)

The survey data will mainly come from Eurobarometer.

The Flash Eurobarometer surveys have a lot of survey questions about special subjects (the environment, EU integration, LQBTQ+ policies etc.). <https://www.gesis.org/en/eurobarometer-data-service/survey-series/flash-eb>

Regular Eurobarometer polls also have the advantage of including data at the NUTS3 subnational unit, which will be invaluable to cross-validate the preferences obtained via MRP (by comparing MRP and disaggregated preferences).

A list of all previous Eurobarometer reports can be found here: <https://dbk.gesis.org/dbksearch/gdesc2.asp?no=0008&search=&search2=&db=e&tab=0&notabs=&nf=1&af=&ll=10>

There are many different datasets spanning the recent years, but my analysis will probably focus on surveys conducted in the 2010s. Eurobarometer polls are known for being rigorously constructed and have often been used in the literature I have reviewed, therefore I don’t anticipate sampling or missing data to be major issues. All Eurobarometer polls have an adequate amount of respondents for the countries I am interested in working with, and there is always the possibility of aggregating different polls to facilitate preference estimation.

1. **Census data (for postratification)**

Post-stratifying involves readjusting preferences at the subnational level by calculating

demographic weights. The literature I have reviewed uses 2011 census data available at <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/population-and-housing-census/census-data/2011-census>

and there additional options to use 2001 census data as well (a more general link to census data in the EU: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/population-and-housing-census/census-data/database>)

1. **European Parliament Roll Call Votes**

Finally, the sub-national preferences will be correlated to MEP votes, which can be accessed in raw format at: <https://parltrack.org/dumps> (under the MEP Plenary votes tab). I have already started perusing the votes, and the format is quite unwieldy because the format is in a json file. Therefore I plan on using pre-made scorecards on MEP voting records to guide which legislation I should be looking at when analyzing votes: <http://www.caneurope.org/publications/blogs/718-mep-scorecards-ranking-european-parliamentarians-on-climate-action>

<https://www.score-ep.org/>

Once the votes are read in, they can be tallied and aggregated into an index score for an MEP’s performance on a certain issue. For instance, an MEP voting in favor of environmental regulation will receive +1 on that vote, 0 if he abstains and -1 if he votes against it.

1. \* I’d like to thank Juan Lopez Martin for help with the conducing the MRP analysis and with finding title. Also many thanks to my advisor Prof. Justin Phillips for teaching me MRP and inspiring me to write this thesis. And thanks to the QMSS class, Elena Krumova and the TAs and students who partook in the discussion seminars. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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4. \* Although the 1957 Treaty of Rome established that MEPs should be elected by a common universal suffrage, it took a threat from the European Parliament to bring the matter to the European Court of Justice to get the Council of the European Union to acquiesce in setting up elections. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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12. \* Another frequently cited example of the EP’s complicated structure is its location: plenary sessions (where MEPs vote on proposed legislation) are held in Strasburg, specialized Committees meet in Brussels, and the Secretariat has its offices in Luxembourg. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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