Emotional Rhetoric and the Rise of Populism in the European Parliament

The expected progress made by so-called populist[a] parties in the European elections on 9 June is likely to radically change the political dynamics within the European Parliament (EP).[b] This transformation will not be limited to numerical balances between political groups: it will also affect the nature of debates and the communication behaviors of EP members (MEPs), notably through the adaptation of traditional parties to populist rhetoric, which largely mobilizes emotions.

This note relies on transcripts of debates held during plenary sessions of the European Parliament between 1999 and 2022. Natural language processing methods are used to study the tone of interventions by MEPs.

It appears that the tone of debates in the European Parliament is evolving. Their level of emotion has significantly increased since 1999. MEPs speak differently depending on the topics discussed, their country of origin, and their ideological positioning. Those from so-called populist parties are distinguished by more emotion in their speeches. However, in response to the rise of these parties, other elected members adapt their rhetoric by intensifying the tone of their speeches in the same way.

While this study does not identify the consequences of such an evolution on the quality of parliamentary work and the perception of the EP by citizens of the European Union, it invites further reflection.

- This note uses data on speeches in plenary sessions of the European Parliament delivered between 1999 and 2022.

- Natural language processing methods are applied to extract the emotional content of each speech.

- Contrary to the stereotype of an institution with cold and technocratic debates, the level of emotion has significantly increased over the period (+21%), both within each topic discussed and because more emotionally charged topics are being addressed.

- Populist Members of the European Parliament use more emotional rhetoric than other members, with an average emotion score 10% higher.

- The choice of topics explains 25% of the emotional gap between populist and non-populist members, and the addition of other factors (country of origin, age, gender) increases this explanation to 29%.

- In response, non-populist members have shifted their speeches towards more emotion.

- We question the possible consequences of this evolution for the functioning and image of the European Parliament.

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[a]We refer to parties with an ideology that perceives political conflict as an opposition between two irreconcilable groups: the "pure people" and the "corrupt elites" (Mudde, 2007).

[b]The latest projections from Europe Elects show that the right-wing populist group Identity and Democracy (ID) could win up to 84 seats (compared to 59 in the current legislature). The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group could obtain 86 seats compared to 68 today.

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Introduction

The European Parliament is often criticized for its limited accountability to the voters (Hix and Høyland, 2013), confining itself to cold, technocratic debates detached from the concrete problems of EU citizens (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2017).

This note challenges this perception, based on the content of the debates in Strasbourg and Brussels. We document a rise in the use of emotional rhetoric by Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). So-called populist members, mostly from the radical right, stand out for their greater emotionality in speeches – but the others have partially modified their speeches in the same direction.

We finally question the consequences of these emotional rhetorics on the deliberations of the European Parliament and the perception that the citizens of the European Union may have of it.

Emotion in the European Parliament

Parliaments are at the heart of representative democracy. They are major places of political debate and conflict. Among EU institutions, this role falls to the Parliament.

Nevertheless, like the other EU institutions, it is often perceived as technocratic and disconnected from citizens' expectations. However, an analysis of the content of speeches made by MEPs in plenary sessions reveals that the debates do not only take place on the ground of technical and quantified arguments but increasingly rely on emotions.

To quantify the emotional charge of MEPs' speeches, we relied on a database of 686,439 oral interventions and written questions made in plenary sessions between July 1999 and October 2022. This corpus is analyzed using natural language processing tools. In particular, the emotion measure used in this analysis comes from the work of Gennaro and Ash (2022). This work uses a machine learning method called *word embeddings* (see Box 1 for more details on the data and textual analysis methods). The idea is as follows: we measure whether a speech is closer to a set of words typical of affective reasoning (based on feelings and affects) or rather to a set of words typical of cognitive reasoning (based on analytical and quantified argumentation). An emotion score of 1 indicates language equidistant from these two types of argumentation. A score above 1 indicates more emotional than cognitive language. A score below 1 characterizes it as more cognitive than emotional.

Figure 1 shows the quarterly evolution of the average level of emotion in speeches at the European Parliament.

This average level of emotion in speeches has significantly increased over the study period: it rose from 0.89 in the fourth quarter of 1999 to 1.08 in the third quarter of 2022 (an increase of 21% in the emotion score)[1]. Each new legislature is on average more emotional than the previous one. This was particularly notable between the 7th and 8th legislatures following the 2014 European elections marked by a wave of electoral successes for so-called populist parties. It should be noted that the beginnings of legislatures are marked by significant peaks in emotions in speeches. A qualitative analysis of the speech content reveals that this is explained by the tendency of newly elected MEPs to thank their electorate and campaign team.
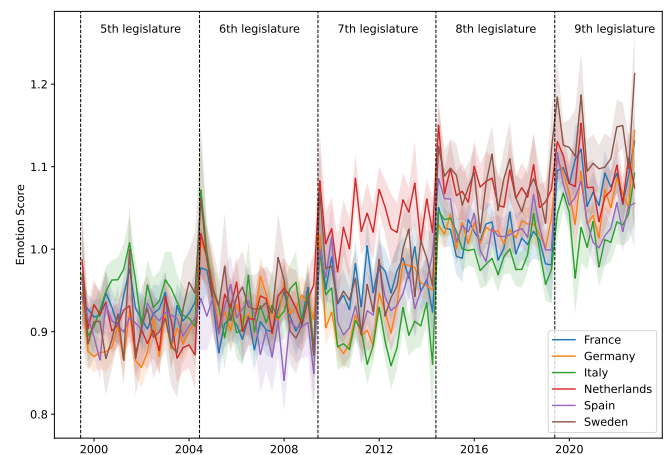

Figure 1: Evolution of emotion score per quarter

Sources: textual data collected from the European Parliament website. Authors' calculations.

Does this average trend of increasing emotion levels in debates hide differences according to the members' states of origin? Figure 2 answers this question. While the overall trend is observed for each country, the level of emotion in speeches differs significantly between them. Thus, Dutch and Swedish MEPs have sometimes tended to speak in more emotional terms than Italian and Spanish ones. Interestingly, this divergence was particularly marked during the 7th legislature, whose highlight was the sovereign debt crisis. For MEPs from certain member states, the speech time by topic may reflect the concerns of their national electorate. Some topics[2] lend themselves more to emotional expression than others. Figure 3 reveals that some themes, such as foreign policy or social policy, are addressed with much more emotion than, for example, the European Union governance or the economy.

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[1]Gennaro and Ash (2022) also observed an increase in emotional rhetoric in the United States Congress, but to a lesser extent: in our analysis period, in the *Senate*, from 0.95 to 1.04 (an increase of 8% in the emotion score), and in the *House*, from 1.05 to 1.10 (an increase of 5% in the emotion score).

[2]Topic labels are obtained using a text analysis method called Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA). Box 1 provides explanations on how this algorithm works.
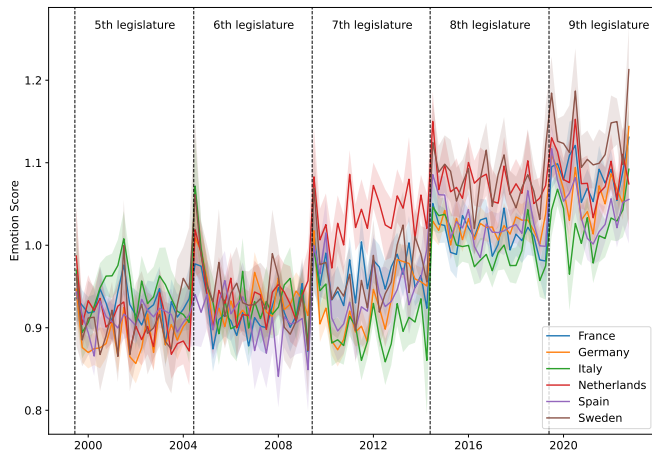
Figure 2: Evolution of emotion by country

Sources: textual data collected from the European Parliament website. Authors' calculations.

Thus, such differences during the 7th legislature may reflect a specialization of MEPs on issues specific to their countries. Hence the low level of emotion of Spanish and Italian MEPs, who focused on economic and financial policies, linked to the sovereign debts crisis. On equivalent topics, however, there is no difference between the emotion scores of different member states.
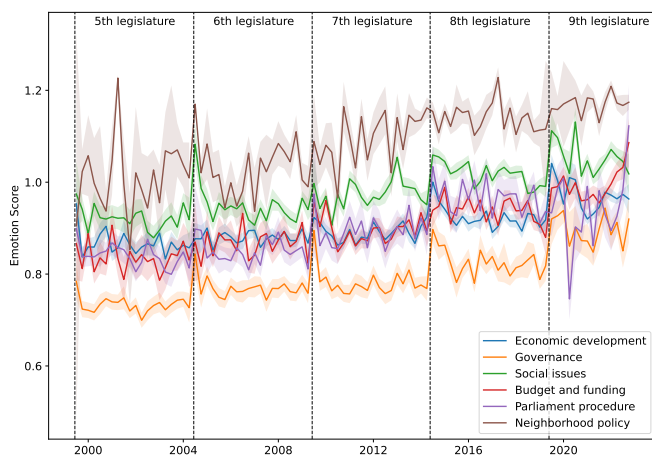

Figure 3: Evolution of emotion by speech topic

Sources: textual data collected from the European Parliament website. Authors' calculations.
Note: Topic labels are obtained using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA).

Moreover, the analysis of MEPs' individual characteristics and the context of their speeches indicates that other parameters can partly explain the increased use of emotion in the EP. In particular, if we successively consider members' speeches and their votes on the discussed bill, we find that they speak with more emotion if their vote goes against the majority of their European political group. We also observe that female members use more emotional vocabulary than their male colleagues. This effect is explained by the fact that they deal more with intrinsically more emotional subjects, because on equivalent topics,

there is no difference.

The study of parliamentary debates content cannot be done without considering the evolution of ideological balances within the EP, since, one of the main political facts of the last decades in the European Union has been the rise of so-called populist parties. Their communication has been described by the literature in communication and political science as characterized by an "extra-emotional ingredient" (Canovan, 1999). According to this idea, so-called populist MEPs use more emotional rhetoric to mobilize voters by playing on feelings like fear, anger, or hope. This is a key factor in their recent electoral successes. The following sections of this note examine the existence of the emotional ingredient in populist communication within the European Parliament. They also consider the entry of so-called populist MEPs as a possible source of the general increase in emotion levels in debates. The final section invites reflection on other dynamics contributing to this transformation of parliamentary debate language and their potential consequences for the institution's functioning.

Populism and the European Parliament

As shown in Figure 1, the 2014 European elections were followed by a notable increase in the emotion level of debates in the EP. These elections were also marked by significant electoral gains for so-called populist parties (see Figure 4).

The rise of these parties since the late 1990s is a global phenomenon (Rosanvallon, 2020) that has not spared the European Parliament. The definition of populism is inherently controversial. In our work, we rely on a minimal definition of the concept of populism by political scientist Cas Mudde. According to this definition, populism is an ideology that perceives political conflict as an opposition between two irreconcilable groups: the "pure people" and the "corrupt elites" (Mudde, 2007). By definition, populism is therefore not associated with any political side. However, in the European Parliament, it is the radical right populist parties that have experienced steady growth in recent decades (see Figure 4).

In practice, we characterize populist parties using data from the expert survey in political science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (CHESS). This database allows us to position political parties on numerous issues. We are particularly interested in the variable measuring the salience of anti-elite rhetoric in their platforms. We consider a party to be populist if the value of this variable is above a certain threshold. In the analysis presented here, this threshold corresponds to the highest decile of the distribution of the anti-elite rhetoric salience

> **Encadré 1 : Method for measuring the emotional content of a speech.**
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> To quantify the emotional content of MEPs' speeches, we have created a corpus of transcripts of plenary debates in the EP. The raw dataset includes 686,439 oral interventions and written questions made between July 1999 and October 2022 - from the beginning of the 5th to the middle of the 9th legislature in both Strasbourg and Brussels. During that time, interventions were made by 2,675 different members. 40% were in English, as MEPs have the opportunity to speak in one of the 24 official languages of the EU. The remaining interventions were automatically translated into English using the *Google Translate* API. To assess the emotional and cognitive load of speech, we use a methodology developed by Gennaro and Ash (2022). It is based on a *machine learning* technique, called word embedding which consists in representing all the words of a corpus by number vectors. The prediction task performed by the algorithm to learn the vector representation of a target word is to predict the context (i.e., surrounding words) in which that target word appears. A word is therefore defined by its context. Words that occur in similar contexts and therefore share similar semantic meanings are expressed by similar vectors. By calculating the Euclidean distance between the vectors representing two words, we obtain a measure of their semantic proximity. We can obtain the vector representation of a speech by the weighted average of all the words that compose it.
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> We then construct the vector representation of two word lexicons : one containing words relating to emotional psychological processes[a] and the other to cognitive psychological processes[b]. These lexicons from the *Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC)* project are considered the reference in terms of word lexicons in psychology and linguistics. The emotion score is then constructed as the distance between the vector representations of a discourse and the emotional lexicon relative to the distance between the vector representations of the same discourse and the cognitive lexicon. For each intervention, we get a score. A score equal to 1 means that it is balanced between the two types of arguments. A score above 1 indicates that it is more emotional than cognitive, while a score below 1 indicates that it is more cognitive than emotional. The advantage of such a method is that it relies not only on the presence or absence of words in a text to obtain a score, but on the semantic proximity of the words present in a text to a set of keywords. The drawback is the 'black box' side of sophisticated *machine learning* methods. However, the ability of this algorithm to differentiate emotionally charged discourses from technical and cognitive ones has been successfully validated through validation exercises performed by human annotators in the Gennaro and Ash, 2022 study.
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> [a]Here are 7 examples of root words among the 629 words of the emotion lexicon: angry, shame, frustrat, depress, terror, glad, fear.
> [b]Here are 7 examples of root words among the 169 words in the cognition lexicon: analys, rethink, recogniz, clarif, deduct, evaluat, insight.
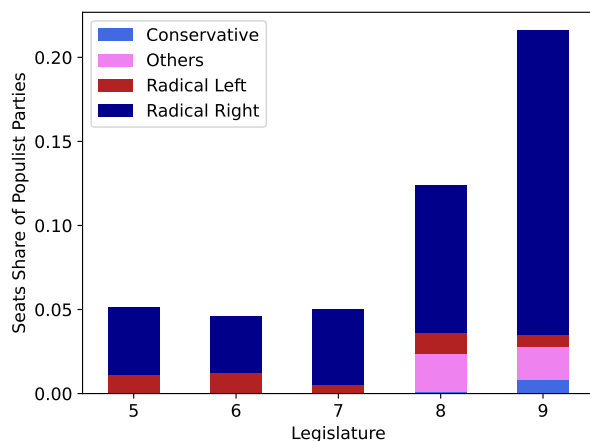
score[3][4].

Figure 4: Percentages of populist seats in the EP

Sources: biographical data of MEPs collected from the European Parliament website.
Note 1: The populist classification comes from the authors' methodology described above.
Note 2: The classification of parties by political families comes from CHESS data.

The perception of European elections as being less important, coupled with the proportional voting system, has his-torically favoured the emergence of parties less present at national level. In particular, radical right populist movements have been represented in the European Parliament continuously since the first elections by universal suffrage in 1979, while they have long been absent or poorly represented in most national parliaments. For example, in France, the National Rally has historically obtained a higher number of seats in the European Parliament than in the National Assembly (Figure 5).

The rise and then the permanent establishment of radical right populist parties within the European Parliament can be traced in three stages. From 1979 to 1999, such right parties were represented but very minority. From 1999 onwards, they increased their share of seats with Eurosceptic platforms like UKIP in the United Kingdom or the June Movement in Denmark. The 2014 elections marked the entrenchment of such populist right parties in most European countries, including Western Europe, with significant electoral gains for the National Front/National Rally in France and the Freedom parties in Austria and the Netherlands. In Eastern Europe, the populist shift of parties like Viktor Orbán's Fidesz and the Polish Law and Justice Party swelled the populist ranks in the European Parliament. In 2019, populist parties obtained more than 20% of the seats, with a remarkable rise of radical right ones. The 9th legislature was also marked by the structuring of these movements within the EP with the formation of the Identity and Democracy group bringing together radical right populist and Eurosceptic parties.

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[3]The CHESS expert survey assigns a score each time a national political party obtains a score in a general election in its country. Thus, the "populism" variable is obtained using the party's most recent score on the anti-elite rhetoric salience variable relative to the speech date.

[4]The results presented in this note are robust to other threshold values, notably for definitions varying from the last decile to the last three deciles of the anti-elite rhetoric measure.
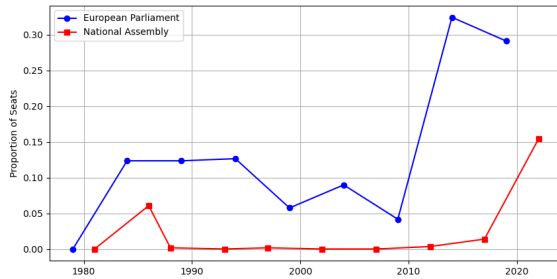
Figure 5: Proportion of seats obtained by the FN (later the RN) in legislative and European elections

Source: https://www.elections.interieur.gouv
Note: Number of seats of the National Front, later National Rally, among the total number of seats in the French National Assembly and the European Parliament.

Populism and emotional rhetoric

To what extent can the rise of so-called populist movements in the European Parliament explain the increasing level of emotion in debates?

Populism and emotion. Figure 6 shows the evolution of the emotion level in speeches by so-called populist and other EP members. Throughout the period, the speeches of the former exhibit a significantly higher average emotion score by 10% compared to the latter. This difference is explained by 25% due to the fact that populist members intervene in debates that address more emotionally charged topics. The addition of other factors (country of origin, age, gender), in addition to the debate topics, only explains 29% of this difference in the use of emotional rhetoric.

Finally, the figure 6 reveals a notable evolution after the 2019 European elections: the difference between the average emotion level of speeches by so-called populist members and other elected officials peaks at 12% during the sixth legislature and decreases significantly to 3% during the last legislature. This seems to suggest that members of other parties adjust their rhetoric to the emotional communication of so-called populist parties.

Propagation of emotion to all MEPs. To explore this possible imitation effect, we conducted two econometric analyses.

With the first, we found that MEPs serving at least two legislatures deliver more emotional speeches when the number of so-called populist MEPs from their country is higher.

We then compared the emotional charge of speeches between MEPs from national parties before and after the announcement of the Brexit referendum. This second analysis confirmed that they adjusted their rhetoric.

We exploited the intensity of electoral competition between pro-Brexit MEPs and others using the differences-in-differences econometric method. This method measures the causal effect of a status change on a studied variable by comparing the evolution of an affected group with that of a comparable but unaffected one. Here, the status studied is an MEPs' exposure to narratives promoted by populist parties. We assume that David Cameron's announcement of a referendum on the UK's membership in the European Union further exposed parties in tight competition with populist ones to the latter's narratives. Our comparison group, or control group, consists of members of the European Parliament who did not face such competition. Finally, we defined competition as tight for an MEPs if their party's electoral score did not exceed the main populist party's score in their country by more than 10%. This second analysis shows that MEPs in tight competition had significantly increased their use of emotional rhetoric.

Taken separately, these two results do not conclusively prove the effect of the arrival of so-called populist MEPs on the others' rhetoric. However, their combination strongly suggests such rhetorical adjustment: to cope with the arrival of MEPs adept at emotional rhetoric, the response of others contributed to raising the overall emotional tone of debates in the EP.
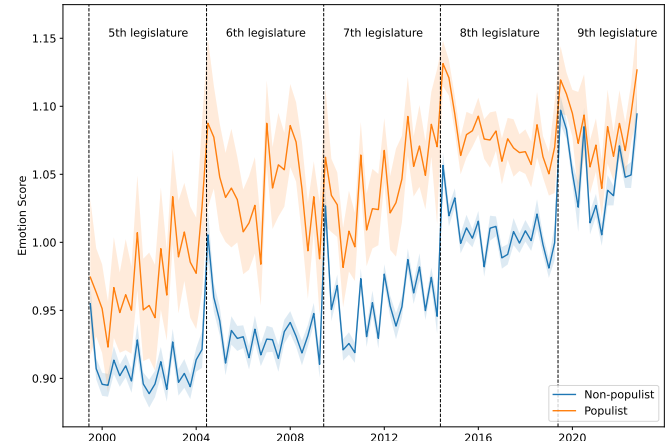

Figure 6: Evolution of emotion score among populist and others MEPs

Sources: textual data collected from the European Parliament website. Authors' calculations.
Note: The populist classification comes from the authors' methodology described above.

Effects of emotion on deliberations and political group polarization within the European Parliament

We have shown that, contrary to popular belief, emotion is indeed present in the plenary debates of the European

Parliament. However, this does not suffice to understand what the rise of emotional rhetoric reveals about broader dynamics within it.

For example, a higher emotion score implies the use of less technical vocabulary and therefore more understandable to citizens. This reduced technicality in speeches could harm the quality of debates or the bills subsequently voted on. Does the democratic process benefit from debates where quantified and in-depth arguments are replaced by feelings? In a global context of increasing political polarization, couldn't the rise of emotion in debates exacerbate conflicts between groups with partially divergent interests? In an analysis related to the work presented here, we examine the process of political polarization through language. We use a natural language analysis method that captures not only differences in topics addressed by MEPs but also variations in how the same topic is addressed, as proposed by Rheault and Cochrane (2020). This analysis does show a rise in polarization similar to that of the emotion level in speeches (Figure 7).

But, conversely, less technical and more emotional debates can bring the European Parliament closer to its electorate, thus strengthening its democratic anchorage. This rise in emotion could then be seen as proof of the emergence of a true European democracy within the EP, with its share of passionate debates, similar to those in national parliaments.
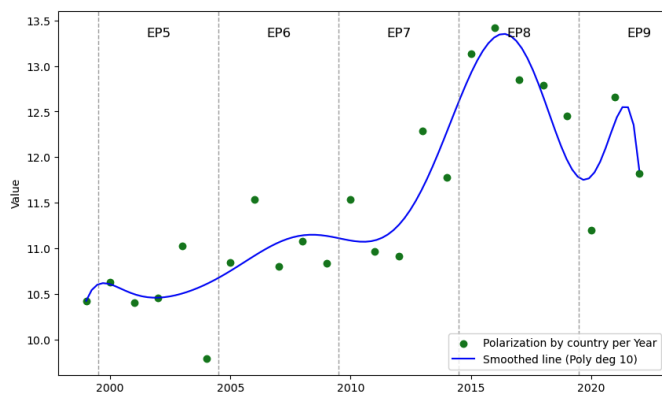
This trend, which formerly distinguished so-called populist parties, has spread to the other ones over the past five years.

In this way, the European Parliament is becoming more like national parliaments. However, our work did not address the underlying factors that lead to increased use of emotions by MEPs. It cannot therefore shed light on the broader consequences. Exploring these questions would help better understand the effects of more emotional debates on the European Parliament's legislative processes.

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Figure 7: Language polarization in the EP

Source: **Hugo_2023**.
Note: Polarization is measured by the Euclidean distance between different representations of European MEPs' speeches. The thick lines represent smoothed splines of these raw distances, highlighting trends in ideological divergence over time.

Conclusion

We have highlighted a set of facts about the use of emotional rhetoric in the European Parliament. Emotion in speeches has been quantified using the textual analysis method developed by Gennaro and Ash (2022). Far from the idea of an EP with strictly technical debates, it appears that MEPs use increasingly emotional language.

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