

SECOND READER THESIS REVIEW FORM

Name of the Student	Silke Maes (84136613)
Date of Submission	23 June 2023
Title of the Thesis	<i>Ceci n'est pas un accord. Contesting informal externalisation: The European Parliament in informal readmission agreements</i>
Reviewer Name / Affiliation	Dr. Abel Escribà-Folch, Department of Political and Social Sciences, Universitat Pompeu Fabra

PLAGIARISM STATEMENT

In my assessment, this thesis is **free** of plagiarism.

KNOWLEDGE AND CONNECTION TO THE FIELD

(relevance of the research question, research objective, literature review)

Informality is certainly a very important aspect of EU politics. The research question this thesis analyzes is pertinent and tackles an important aspect of EU politics in general and parliamentary action, specifically, the EU parliament, which has idiosyncratic characteristics compared to national parliaments.

The objectives are clearly stated in the thesis and are relevant to the extant literature. Basically, the key question is, why the EU parliament has limited opposition in such important issues such as migration policy? More precisely, being the parliament a place where ideas and arguments are discussed, it is relevant to explore which arguments and drivers have the EP in terms of contesting migration agreements.

The author justifies the relevance of the analysis properly and provides good insights into why it is important.

The literature review is, in general, properly done and looks comprehensive. The student identifies important gaps in the existing literature and uses a varied range of sources. However, I believe many issues discussed are not as relevant as others for the theoretical claims and analysis. Additionally, there are some findings in the literature that the author explains but the implications of which are not fully discussed, which can be relevant to analyzing the informal power the EP has in terms of EU agreements generally, and specifically, migration agreements. Examples are a great way of explaining the implications of the literature's findings and agreements, and the author provides only a few of them.

Furthermore, the thesis focuses on the drivers of parliamentary behavior and how the EP can contest agreements, but the section dedicated to it (“Section E. What drives parliamentary behavior?”) does not discuss it in detail and it is just another section in the literature review. This limits the contribution the thesis makes in terms of original theory building and theoretical contribution, which is a central pillar to any study and a thesis in particular. For example, the exploration of drivers seems to be focused on motives, leaving opportunities out of the picture, which in some institutional setting and in the context of informal interactions are very relevant.

Overall, I consider that, even though there are some weak points, the literature review is good and engages with the current literature properly.

ANALYSIS

(methodology, argument, theoretical backing, appropriate work with sources)

The design and methodology the author uses is pertinent to the topic under study and the research question. Indeed, the use of qualitative methods seems a proper way to examine the drivers of contestation. The theoretical backing and the use of Thevenin (2020) and de Wilde et al (2016) conceptualization of contestation and the underlying concepts are appropriate.

Qualitative content analysis of plenary debates and parliamentary questions is well justified and explained and fits the purposes of the thesis, and based on the discussion presented, one can easily see that the author has spent a lot of time searching, reading, and selecting those debates and questions relevant to the study. This can also be observed in the case studies and how the author uses many quotations from MEPs. Interviews seem also appropriate as they provide a more nuanced understanding of the topic under study: Elites (decision-makers) were those who were actually in these debates, and who possess the valuable and reliable information in terms of knowing exactly what was done and how it was done.

However, there are some important aspects that are problematic: the operationalization of contestation, the factors that the author considers to be drivers, and the case selection.

- Operationalization of contestation: The author, drawing on the literature, affirms that contestation is measured using three underlying concepts (i.e., salience, range of actors, and opinion or direction of the contesting arguments). This is not problematic per se. What might be problematic, however, is that the practical operationalization does not provide any proper measure or scale of contestation easily testable and replicable. For example, how many parliamentary debates, questions, and speeches are needed to assess that something is highly salient (as opposed to not salient or slightly salient)? How many speakers and political parties are needed? How can we assess that the direction of the arguments and justifications entails actually contestation because does not align with the “official” narrative? Regarding the first two concepts, we need a threshold to identify the minimum number of debates, questions, speeches, speakers, and parties that are needed to say that something is in fact contested. As for the last concept, we need a justification of why something is subjectively identified as contestation or not. All these elements need further discussion and justification to ensure the results are not driven simply by the author’s choices.
- Factors identified in the conclusions: the author identifies six factors that are alleged rivers of contestation (information; salience; concerns about respecting HRs and international

law; defense of EP prerogatives; prior relations with partner country; ideological composition of the EP). Here, salience is a concept of the operationalization of contestation and a factor that drives parliamentary behavior, therefore is a concept that is both in the independent variable (driver) and part of the dependent variable (contestation). This is obviously problematic. Additionally, why aren't the drivers of contestation concepts that are part of the operationalization of contestation? There is thus a problem in terms of the direction of the arrows. The six factors identified affect the three concepts that consequently shape contestation, therefore: six factors (independent variables) → three concepts (mediators) → contestation (dependent variable).

- Case selection: the author selects cases based on the dependent variable's variation (contestation). However, if we cannot identify whether an agreement is highly contested, how come the cases are already identified as highly, medium, and limitedly contested. A testable measure of contestation is needed, one that allows to identify contested or not contested agreements. Basically, based on the evidence, one knows ex-ante whether an agreement was highly contested but then the author identifies different factors that are all present in some of them but not in all cases. From a comparative perspective, one needs variation in the drivers explaining the outcome, which the design adopted does not ensure.

One way to address the concerns above would be to use a QCA design to examine the conditions and their combinations that are related to different levels of contestation.

Finally, the author analyses the EP as a unitary actor, something that can be problematic because there are many different parties and ideologies within. However, at least the author acknowledges this is a limitation, yet one that could have been easily avoided in my opinion.

CONCLUSIONS

(persuasiveness, link between data and conclusions, achievement of research objectives)

The author derives some interesting conclusions from the research, although with some limitations, as noted. I think that the factors the author identifies as drivers of contestation are pertinent and logical, though as stated previously, the design used to identify them presents some shortcomings.

The qualitative content analysis and the four interviews conducted give internal validity to the findings and demonstrate that the author has performed an extensive analysis. The author also discusses the implications of the results, though does not specify the extension of the external validity of the findings. Were the 6 factors only important from the Valetta Summit in 2015 until the end of the 8th parliamentary term in 2019? Creating a measure of contestation that would allow testing other periods would have implied that these factors might be present in other periods of time and in other policy issues unrelated to migration.

FORMAL ASPECTS AND LANGUAGE

(appropriate language, adherence to academic standards, citation style, layout)

The thesis uses the appropriate language and follows academic standards in general. However, I do not consider an academic standard the (extensive) use of bold throughout the whole thesis to emphasize parts of the text that are important; that is something that should be avoided, and use italics for emphasis very sporadically. Also, one should be careful when using words like

“demonstrate”, “predict”, “determine” which have strong causal implications that cannot be derived from a research design.

The author uses many abbreviations that are not explained. A glossary or index of abbreviations would have made the reading much easier.

The author cites properly and is consistent in using the same citation style throughout the text. However, the use of citations could have been improved and made more efficient by not citing the same work several times in the same paragraph, something that happens throughout the text.

There might be some ethical concerns regarding the anonymity of the people interviewed. Even though the author does not provide the names of the interviewees, the author states the position they held during that parliamentary term, something that makes the identification of these individuals very easy. The author states that only one interview was recorded after explicit permission, therefore a copy of the informed consent form (without the signature of the person interviewed) and the approval from the Ethical Commission of the author’s university, as well as an ethical statement at the end of the thesis, would have been a good practice. Also a script of the semi-structured interviews would have been interesting to see.

The author quotes an MP during an interview in what I believe is German and does not provide a translation. This quotation is in bold and it is also the title of a subsection, thus the author finds it sufficiently relevant to emphasize it but does not provide a translation.

Other small issues relate to some grammatical and punctuation mistakes, as well as many titles and footnotes not starting with capital letters.

SUMMARY ASSESSMENT

(strong and weak points of the thesis, other issues)

Strong points:

- The framing of the topic and its relevance.
- The research question and objectives.
- The literature review and how the author identifies important gaps.
- The extensive qualitative content analysis and being able to conduct interviews with MPs.

Weak points:


- The research design.
- Ethical concerns.

FORMAL REQUIREMENTS

(for example, word count)

The author provides a wrong word count, though I believe it might be a typo.

(See below for grading scheme and grading descriptor)

Grade (1 – 10)	7.9 (B)
Date	Reviewer Signature
18/07/2023	 Dr. Abel Escribà-Folch Department of Political and Social Sciences Universitat Pompeu Fabra

2 – 3 SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR THESIS DEFENCE

1.	Regarding the operationalization of contestation, how could it be used in other research?
2.	Regarding the role of the European Parliament, do you believe your findings can be extrapolated to other time periods?
3.	In your opinion, what powers do you think the European Parliament will have in the future? Do you think it will be able to counterbalance the power of the European Commission?

LEIDEN UNIVERSITY GRADING SCHEME

Theses can receive a grade between 0-10, with the exception of grades *between* 5.0 and 6.0— e.g., a grade of 5 or 6 is permitted, while a grade of 5.1, 5.5, or 5.9 is not.

GRADE DESCRIPTOR FOR MA EPS THESIS

<p>8.0 – 10 (A)</p>	<p>All elements of the thesis are combined in an effective and convincing form. The case for the research question and/or hypothesis is well-made and grounded in a significant and topical issue, whether derived from the literature or empirics. The thesis delivers excellent, powerful engagement with the literature, suggesting full mastery of academic and/or empirical debates. The thesis conveys an excellent understanding of how to design and conduct research. The selected method aligns with the research question/hypothesis, and the student evidences a full understanding of it, both at the abstract and applied level. The thesis offers an original answer based on an outstanding analysis of relevant sources, primary as well as secondary where appropriate, that advances our understanding of the matter. It is well-structured and shows excellent awareness of the need to account for the audience. Additionally, the thesis must demonstrate a full understanding of and compliance with academic conventions, including but not limited to the presentation, referencing and use of footnotes. A thesis performing at this level should be considered to be exceptional, indicative of a student ready to begin doctoral research or high-level professional work.</p>
<p>7.5 – 7.9 (B)</p>	<p>The thesis covers all the issues mentioned in the description of thesis elements above but does not meet the exceptional standard above. It will be excellent, at least in part, with relatively minor deficiencies that do not compromise the research design and the relevance of the answer. The research question and/or hypothesis will be of significance, and the student will deliver an original contribution to knowledge by answering it. The thesis will be grounded in a very good or excellent evaluation of an appropriate body of literature, discussing key concepts and debates maturely and convincingly. The student will demonstrate a very good facility with the demands of good research design. The selected method will align with the research question/hypothesis and the student evidence a good understanding of it, both at the abstract and applied levels. The thesis offers an original answer based on a very good analysis of relevant sources, primary as well as secondary where appropriate, that goes some way to advance our understanding of the matter. Additionally, the thesis must demonstrate a full understanding of and compliance with academic conventions, including but not limited to the presentation, referencing and use of footnotes.</p>
<p>7.0 – 7.4 (C)</p>	<p>The thesis covers all the issues mentioned in the description of thesis elements above but with some significant deficiencies. The research question and any corresponding hypotheses are developed according to academic standards and linked to the scholarly literature but do not appear entirely convincing. The answer offered is not fully persuasive but offers relevant insight into the topic. The thesis will be referring to an adequate amount of literature, but the reference and the contribution to the academic debate are not really insightful. The research methods show interesting and innovative ideas, but there are some doubts about their development. The thesis still demonstrates knowledge and application of academic conventions (including, but not limited to the presentation, referencing and the use of footnotes), but there are apparent issues with their employment and/or a lack of attention to detail.</p>
<p>6.4 – 6.9 (D)</p>	<p>The thesis covers most issues mentioned in the description of thesis elements above, but it is relatively pedestrian, particularly in relation to the embedding of the research question. There is some engagement with the literature, identification of the method and operationalisation of that method to the research. The analysis is present but not fully developed. The selected research method may be of dubious utility, suggesting the student has an imperfect understanding of research design. The question and/or hypothesis is answered/tested but not in a very compelling fashion. The thesis is vulnerable to criticism that it is derivative and</p>

	descriptive, with opportunities for delivering critical analysis not exploited. Peripheral but important issues such as presentation and referencing are problematic, and the student does not always comply with other forms of academic convention.
6.0 – 6.3 (E)	The thesis does not cover all the issues mentioned in the description of thesis elements above but offers a structured piece of relevant analysis that is embedded in the literature and provides an answer to a research question. The method of analysis is explained, albeit not fully developed and persuasive. The thesis is pedestrian, descriptive and unoriginal in form.
5.1 – 5.9	<i>We do not issue grades in this area</i>
1 – 5.0 (F)	The thesis does not represent a piece of independent research as far as it does not formulate a straightforward research question and/or lacks engagement with the literature and/or the method of inquiry and/or does not provide an answer based on a critical analysis of primary and secondary sources.