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In spite of the considerable expansion of its powers, the academic literature on the European Parliament is far from comprehensive. This publication intends to fill the gap by providing a theoretically as well as empirically founded account of the European Parliament's evolution during the last 15 years.

The study examines the validity of different sets of expectations regarding the Parliament's roles. The authors address three model views of the European Parliament: The Parliament as a marginal and neglected alibi institution, the Parliament as an independent and striking actor in the institutional multi-level structure of the EU, and the Parliament an open political arena, in which the essential socio-economic conflicts are reflected and manifested in form of party-political debate.

To analyse these different models of the Parliament, the authors use a catalogue of parliamentary functions that considers the specific conditions of the EU system. The authors define these functions as policy-making, controlling, elective, system-developing and interaction: Policy-making refers to the participation of the European Parliament in the EU policy cycle in relation to the Council and the Commission. It reflects Parliament's capacity to influence the preparation, adoption, implementation and control of binding legislative acts, the budget of the Community, etc. The control function refers to Parliament's rights and obligations to call other institutions of the Union to account. Regarding the elective function of Parliament, the study examines the European Parliament's roles in different appointment procedures. The system-development function refers to the participation of the European Parliament in the development of the EU's constitutional system. Finally, the interaction function serves to examine the relations between the Parliament and the citizens of the Union.

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