

Analyzing the Policy Agenda of the European Council

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Introduction

In recent times, the influence of the European Union (EU) on policy decisions within member states has become more visible and contested than many years before in its political history. In dealing with the financial crisis, the symbol of monetary integration, priorities set in EU institutions are crucial to domestic policies. Member states belonging to the Eurozone in particular face hard choices on their budgets as a consequence of agreements set within the European Council and rules enforced by the Commission. Some critics even contend that the EU 'dictates' the policy agendas of its member states.

Within the EU, the European Council has increasingly gained prominence as the institution that sets the parameters for EU policies and makes the most important decisions. Although it has been fuelled by the financial crisis, this pre-eminent role is the outcome of a longer process in which the European Council has steadily gained political power and has come to be seen as the apex of the EU's political system. The preeminence of this body manifests itself in its two distinct roles. To begin with, the European Council has become the focal point for

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setting the EU's overall agenda and taking the key decisions in important areas. In that vein, the institution effectively determines the EU budget and, for instance, takes all the crucial decisions regarding the financial crisis. In addition, the European Council is the final arbiter for issues stalemated within the Council of Ministers, forging compromises that the last subsequently adopts in a formal sense. As a result, understanding what issues the European Council deals with and how it sets its priorities is crucial for understanding EU politics.

For the European Council, agenda-setting is a particularly pressing issue, since attention to major problems is subjected to strong forces of competition. This has become highly visible in economic crisis management recently. As problems rise and expand in salience and drama, they often are processed one by one. This also means that other problems must wait for their turn. In this regard, the European Council is like any top political institution in domestic political systems, such as full cabinets or prime ministers in parliamentary systems or the president in (semi-)presidential systems. The role at the top of the political pyramid means that only the most urgent issues come onto the agenda of such institutions, while they delegate or leave more routine matters to the plethora of policymaking bodies that operate at lower political levels.

We read about policy and budget proposals of the Commission and about European summit meetings in the news headlines. But we are still at the beginning of understanding the dynamics of agenda-setting and policy change, and their consequences for the way the European Council and EU politics in general work. In this article, we present some of the research on the European Council agenda that we have undertaken throughout the past few years. To introduce our findings, we will first take a closer look at the debate on whether the EU is comparable to other political systems and the challenges this presents for studying agenda setting in the EU. Then, we will highlight three key conclusions that can be drawn from our analyses so far, showing how and why the European Council operates like top political institutions in national

polities and where its agenda dynamics are different.

The EU as 'an N of 1'?

One feature of the EU is that, similar to federal polities, it provides a variety of access points for policy actors aiming to initiate or alter the course of public policy. This is a more specific meaning of what Marks et al. (1996) have called a system of multilevel governance. Political or social actors that want to put an issue onto the EU agenda can target multiple venues – including single general directorates in the European Commission or the Council of the EU, committees and members of the European Parliament, influential non-governmental organizations and interest groups, representatives of member state governments, and so forth. In this constellation, policy actors from member states can direct their attempts to set the agenda 'upward' whenever this helps them to overcome domestic opposition, as Guiraudon (2000) described for the case of internal security and migration-control policies in the 1980s. A recent experience of this is how Northern member states of the Eurozone successfully tried to empower the European Commission to enforce national budget discipline – and thus keep Southern Eurozone countries under control. As Princen (2009) shows, actors with stakes in major policy issues also use one of the 'horizontal' routes within the EU. This happens with issues on which formal EU jurisdictions are already well established, but this venue shopping also may involve new issues and jurisdictional territory.

A theoretical point made just over a decade ago by Peters is that, with all these venues for policy initiative, the EU is still struggling to find its own 'policy equilibrium' in most domains where it has moved to develop initiatives. The EU in this view is a recently emerged institutional setting where, unlike in national political systems, the pattern is one of 'rapidly shifting policy agendas' (Peters 2001, 85). Princen (2009) points to an important feature of the EU that may affect agenda-setting and the extent to which it is, as Peters argues, in constant policy agenda movement and tinkering about the

boundaries of jurisdictions. This feature is the rather indirect link between decision makers and public opinion and the weakness of a 'European public sphere'. Most importantly, agenda-setting in the EU involves a 'scale dimension': it is not sufficient to show that an issue is relevant to the EU; there also must be strong testimony for EU policy initiative rather than national activity. This rationale bears on the effectiveness and legitimacy of EU instruments (Princen 2009, 36–43).

These and other ideas about the institutional design of the EU and its consequences for policymaking often led analysts to stress the 'unique' nature of the Union; from a comparative perspective it has been called 'an N of 1' (Caporaso et al. 1997). While there is no doubt that the historical and institutional legacy of the EU is quite unlike those of traditional nation-states, it is an empirical question whether the way in which this political system allocates attention to problems and seeks stability in its policy choices is really different from political decision making within countries. The work on political agendas of different states has shown that 'equilibrium', that is, stability in attention to problems on the agenda and mostly incremental changes in policy are interrupted by large shifts, punctuations (Baumgartner et al. 2009). Thus, one central question here is whether the EU displays a similar pattern or a different path of agenda development.

Given the high level of institutional complexity of the EU, John (2006, 982) has called the EU "the toughest test for the Policy Agendas Project." To embark on this test, the EU Agendas Project applies the concepts and methods of the Comparative Agendas Project in order to systematically analyze EU policy agendas and obtain a better understanding of their dynamics. A modified version of the coding scheme was developed to account for some distinctive features of the EU, such as the establishment of the single market, cohesion policy, and enlargement. Using this coding scheme,

we can trace attention for (sets of) issues in the EU institutions across time, and compare this with the patterns found in other political systems.

Agenda dynamics in the European Council

The European Council project was the first large-scale data collection on EU policy agendas. The European Council consists of the heads of state or government of the EU member states, and it meets between some three and six times per year. In the European integration process, it has been characterized as 'unstoppable' (Werts 2008). Until the Lisbon Treaty went into force at the end of 2009, the formal presidency of this institution rotated each semester between member states. At summit meetings, so-called Conclusions are produced that contain the main points on the agenda and the headlines of policy story behind them. Conclusions contain expressions of concern and many instances of attention to matters to be delegated to other policymaking institutions within the EU. Following the EU agendas codebook, we content-coded all Conclusions produced between 1975 and 2011, resulting in a dataset of some 42,000 observations.

The results of our first analyses suggest that agenda-setting processes within the European Council have some EU-specific features, while at the same time a comparative perspective tells us that the emerging pattern resembles that observed in national political institutions where 'high politics' are expressed. Three main findings regarding the European Council's agenda need to be stressed:

First, this agenda shows that some topics are, to paraphrase George Orwell, 'more equal' in obtaining attention than other ones. International affairs, the economy, and matters of structure and governance of the EU together cover a large part of the European Council agenda most of the time, and they condition the space for all other topics (Alexandrova, Carammia, and Timmermans 2012,

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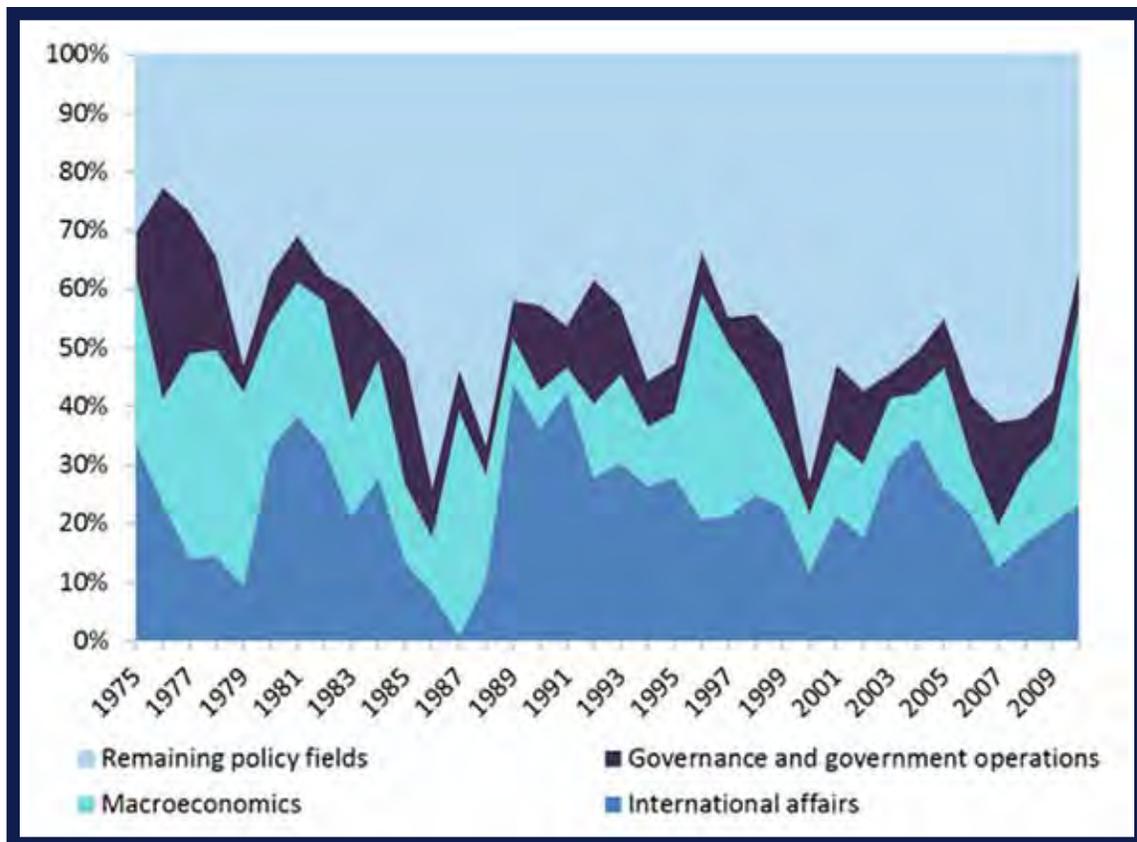
82–83). As a result, the European Council agenda is highly skewed toward a limited set of issues.

This pattern is similar to what has been found in a comparative analysis of executive agendas in six countries, including the US (Jennings et al. 2011). If political systems, despite their institutional variation, display similarity in the process of allocating attention to some categories of problems versus others, this points to general core issues of government. As the formal policy jurisdictions of the EU are quite dissimilar to institutional arrangements within countries, whether federal or unitary states, this is a striking finding. It suggests that there is a basic set of matters that not only is addressed in all political systems, but also takes prevalence over other policy problems whenever the chips are down.

A second key finding is that the agenda of the European Council shows a punctuated pattern of attention change: small, incremental changes in attention to problems are frequent, but large shifts also occur. Indeed, the European Council agenda

appears to be quite volatile, with issues that previously obtained summit attention being dropped entirely (Alexandrova, Carammia, and Timmermans 2012, 76–79). However, compared with other political agendas mapped so far, the European Council shows a higher tendency to sacrifice attention to some problems in order to highlight others. The degree to which topics completely disappear from the agenda, be it often temporarily, is not found in analyses of national executives that also are venues of expressive high politics. In the UK and the Netherlands, for example, it is more rare to see individual policy topics disappear from the annual agenda presented in the Queen's Speech (John and Jennings 2010; Breeman et al. 2009). Intuitively, this pattern of small and larger shifts in which matters on the agenda are replaced may be connected to the institutional properties of the European Council. Heads of State and Government within this institution often form coalitions on individual policy issues, and while some of these can be stable, coalitional realignments are made

Source: Alexandrova, Carammia, and Timmermans, 2012.



as members of the European Council change, and topics move up and down in priority.

A third finding sheds some light on the factors influencing the setting of the agenda. There does not appear to be a clear effect of the presidency in determining the prioritization of issues in the European Council. The rotation of this office until December 2009 from one country to another had little effect on the overall composition of the policy agenda, irrespective of which member state was presiding over the European Council (Alexandrova and Timmermans, forthcoming).

As a consequence, there are more indications that attention volatility is an effect of the location of the European Council within the institutional architecture of the EU. Through its composition, the institution is exposed to multiple pressures and demands from member states, and as the arena for expressing high politics it also must respond to issues from the broader international environment. With so much stress on processing diverse matters, the agenda becomes more volatile. Further, as more issues intrude the agenda, the European Council uses its institutional flexibility to adapt and schedule more summit meetings. Thus, issues disappear, but they may re-appear as political coalitions within the institution are reshaped and matters become more urgent. Moreover, low-key attention or disappearance from the European Council agenda does not mean an issue is ignored in European policymaking. Indeed, low attention may actually indicate that an issue has been delegated successfully to other policymaking arenas where policy output is in production.

Conclusions

The EU is becoming increasingly central to the politics and policy of European member states, while at the same time its democratic legitimacy is widely at stake. The policy agendas perspective provides an analytical view informed by theory and applied in large-scale empirical inquiry that can help to obtain a better understanding of the way

priorities are set in the EU. The European Council Project – of which some findings are presented in this contribution – is one example, with other projects in the other EU institutions being underway. A similar data-coding approach is conducted for the European Commission and the European Parliament, which all will be presented on the EU agendas project website (<www.policyagendas.eu>). These are not ‘just’ data collection enterprises. The projects are meant to cast a better long-term view on the dynamics of issue attention within EU institutions. And they are meant to be related, in order to show how agendas of different bodies may vary together, or follow different rhythms. These processes are induced by characteristics of single institutions, but also by the logic of interaction between them, a central object of debate on the EU, of which our understanding is still limited. Thus, in this way, we are able to track problems over time, determine the conditions under which they acquire urgency status or drop off the political radar screen, and see how problems ‘travel’ across policymaking arenas until they are turned into output or left undecided and shelved until a new upsurge of attention to them occurs.

Further research within the EU Agendas Project will also focus on specific major policy topics, analyzing not only waves of attention to them but also tracking how portraits and definitions of issues in the relevant domain evolve. This type of analysis complements the initial mapping of attention in order to show how the mobilization of bias – that central concept in political science – actually works, and how such mobilization happens for different types of problems. The context of these processes is that attention to problems is always contingent and priorities are relative and often temporary. This inherently political nature of attention and agenda-setting also applies to the EU. Mapping and explaining this process is not just important from an academic point of view, but also for understanding international institutions that play increasingly central roles in European politics.

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