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# **Agenda Setting in the European Council**

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*To the memory of my grandmother Petra*

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# 1. Introduction

When the Libyan Revolution broke out in February 2011, the European Council called a special meeting to voice the European Union's (EU) support for democratisation. When following the recent economic crisis youth unemployment figures began to rise dramatically, the European Council dedicated special attention to this topic over the course of 2012, culminating in a proposal on Youth Employment Initiative in February 2013. When long-term policy on establishing EU internal energy market was in the making, the European Council first endorsed the need for such a project in 2005, and since then has regularly monitored progress, commenting on Commission reports, requesting Member States to implement new directives, and fixing the deadline for the completion of the common energy market. In short, the European Council has had its footprint on almost every issue circulating in the EU policy process, setting the agenda of the Union and taking major decisions for the course of integration.

Not surprisingly therefore this institution has been called the 'engine' (Johnston, 1994: 145) of the Union, its 'supreme political authority' (Westlake & Galloway, 2004: 171), or 'a locus of power second to none in the ... EU's institutional system today' (Hayes-Renshaw & Wallace, 2006b: 165). The European Council comprises the Heads of State or Government of all EU member states, together with the President of the Commission, and since December 2009 a permanent President of the European Council.<sup>1</sup> They meet regularly since March 1975 in order to 'provide the Union with

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<sup>1</sup> The Heads of State or Government used to be assisted by their Foreign Ministers (who could be replaced by other junior ministers sometimes), while the President of the Commission was accompanied by another Commission member. This practice was abolished by the Lisbon Treaty due to the large number of participants but such kind of 'assistantship' is still viable in special cases. It was also the Treaty of Lisbon which introduced a permanent European Council President. Previously, meetings were chaired by the President-in-office, i.e. the Head of State or Government from the country holding the rotating EU Presidency.

the necessary impetus for its development and ... define the general political directions and priorities thereof (Treaty of Maastricht)<sup>2</sup>. While the claim of observers that the EU summits constitute ‘the government of Europe’ (Peter Ludlow, in Peeperkorn, 2013; see also Werts, 2008) might still appear an overly strong definition, scholars agree that the European Council should be studied as ‘the nexus of European political governance’ (Foret & Rittelmeyer, 2014b: 2).

Thanks to the virtue of its composition, the institution has always had relative discretion in the selection of topics for discussion and the attention it can spend on them. But behind this self-sustained collective freedom of choice there are multiple factors which directly or indirectly influence the final composition of the body’s agenda. Our knowledge thereof and understanding of the processes underlying such policy dynamics are severely limited. This dissertation deals with the question of what affects the agenda of the European Council, by analysing the nature of attention shifts in the institution and examining determinants of its agenda’s structure and scope. The answer to this question has implications for both studies of the political system of the EU and its policy output, and the literature on issue prioritisation and political attention.

This introduction sets the framework for the enquiry. It begins with a brief overview of the literature studying policy agendas in the EU, and then turns towards the European Council and its involvement in EU agenda setting. The following two sections present the limited existing knowledge about the topics of deliberation at European Council meetings and the factors determining issue selection and emphasis, which serves as a basis for the subsequent research. Then, the core methodological approach taken in the analyses, in terms of measuring the European Council agenda, is outlined. Finally, the structure of the dissertation is set out, with short descriptions of the following studies.

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the main provisions regarding the European Council in the EU Treaties see annex 1.

## **Agenda Setting and the EU**

Political agenda is a concept which denotes ‘the set of issues that are the subject of decision making and debate within a given political system at any one time’ (Baumgartner, 2001: 288). Thus, setting the political agenda means allocating attention across policy issues, which involves both selection and prioritisation (Cobb & Elder, 1971). Each political system has limited capacity to process the multiplicity of agenda items (Kingdon, 1984) or, in other words, due to bounded rationality policy makers’ attention is scarce and only a limited number of issues can gain access (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005b). Therefore, rather than reacting duly to information signals, policy makers tend to ignore information as long as this is sustainable, or overreact by allocating attention disproportionately. In the long run this results in a punctuated equilibrium pattern of attention (Baumgartner & Jones, 2005; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005b).

The study of agenda setting in the EU has just come of age. It can be traced back to the mid-1990s, and in particular to an article by Guy Peters (1994; see also 2001), which emphasised how different the EU system is from those of nation states as regards this process. The European Community was seen as offering multiple access opportunities for policy entrepreneurs, and featuring a dense number of venues with flexible jurisdictional boundaries. Since then, the research has grown and developed in a few directions. Studies of EU agenda setting have focused on the role of different EU institutions and member states in the process (e.g. Blom-Hansen, 2008; Bunse, 2009; Hartlapp, Metz, & Rauh, 2010; 2013; Tallberg, 2003b), the involvement of organised interests (e.g. Coen & Richardson, 2009; Klüver, 2013), issue framing and underlying strategies behind it (e.g. Daviter, 2001; Rhinard, 2010), agenda dynamics exhibited by single policy issues (e.g. Ackrill & Kay, 2011; Moschella, 2011), as well as theorising on the specific nature of EU agenda setting or testing the extent to which existing theories apply to the EU context (e.g. Citi, 2013; Princen & Rhinard, 2006; Princen & Kerremans, 2008).

The formation of EU policy agendas consists of three steps: emergence of an issue in transnational European policy debates, followed by selection by EU institutions and

placement on the governmental agenda, and ending with a further move of the issue towards the decision agenda if potential obstacles are overcome (Princen, 2009). Yet, different reasons can be concealed behind the selection of an issue and usually there is no single cause to be traced.<sup>3</sup> An important factor to take into account is competencies of the Union versus the Member States, as well as powers of one EU institution versus another. The fact that as a political system the EU is in a continuous redesign provides favourable conditions for redrawing of jurisdictional boundaries and windows of opportunity for the entry of new policy items. This also makes it easier to redefine issues and allows for alternation between conflict expansion and contraction. In short, the overall receptivity of the EU agenda is dependent upon institutional architecture, issue framing, and skilful redrawing of the boundaries of political conflict (Princen, 2007; 2009). The exact nature of each of these elements varies with respect to the policy venue involved.

## Focus and Relevance of the Research Project

The simple question ‘Who sets the EU agenda?’ does not have a straightforward answer. According to the treaties the European Commission has monopoly over legislative initiatives. This legal standing has motivated a perception of the European Commission as the central actor in EU agenda setting (e.g. Klüver, 2013; Schmidt, 2004). But more often scholars point out a complex interdependency of the main EU bodies in this process. Agenda-setting power is seen as a ‘shared and contested competence’ by the main institutions – the European Council, the Council of Ministers, the Commission and the Parliament – with various interest groups and subnational entities also trying to influence the political agenda (Cini, 1996: 145-146; Marks, Hooghe, & Blank, 1996: 359). Although this interaction of multiple venues is typical of multilevel systems, and arguably even more of the EU (Peters, 1994; 2001), ultimately agenda setting in the Union can happen following two mechanisms:

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<sup>3</sup> As Kingdon (1984) points out, the important consideration about agendas is not the *origin* of an issue but the *conditions* under which it moves up.

ascending from below in a 'low politics' route or moving down from above in a 'high politics' trajectory (Princen & Rhinard, 2006). In the first type issues originate in expert working groups within the Commission and climb the ladder of the EU organisational hierarchy. The high politics path starts at the top where the Heads of State and Government of EU member states interact, most notably in the European Council, and then descends to the formal policy-making machinery.

Hence, two institutions of extremely different nature – the Commission and the European Council – both play a gatekeeper role for the EU agenda. The first body has legal embedding as formal initiator and exhibits a supranational drive towards deeper integration, while the second one enjoys the clout of ultimate political authority and exercises it in providing impetus for EU development. Yet, the European Council's establishment and self-triggered power expansion has actually contributed to the decline of the Commission's agenda setting role (Moravcsik, 1998; Nugent, 2010; Werts, 2008). The struggle between the two institutions in this respect has been subject to limited empirical research, and only recently some preliminary evidence suggested the notion of competitive cooperation due to high level of interdependence and mutual influence (Bocquillon & Dobbels, 2014; see also Bouwen, 2009; Eggermont, 2012). And yet, as Werts (2008: 46) notes, the European Commission has admitted that only a limited number of its proposals (some 10 per cent) are the result of a 'proper initiative'. This undermining of the Commission's position is largely due to the European Council requesting it to prepare reports, present proposals, etc.

Despite the lack of consensus on the question 'Who sets the EU agenda?' and the dominant notion of some sort of institutional interaction, the role of the European Council in this process is recognized as crucial. The body is not only at the 'centre' or 'heart' of decision making in the EU (Bonvicini & Regelsberger, 1991; Nugent, 2010) but it has also turned into the main agenda-setting institution (Werts, 2008). Looking at the most significant achievements at the summits, van Grinsven recognises 'enormous influence' of the negotiations' results over the European integration process (2003: 4). De Schoutete and Wallace suggest that since its establishment, the European Council has 'fixed the agenda of the Union, especially as the EU has moved beyond the specific tasks laid down in the original treaties' (2002: 10). It has

been the incubator of new initiatives, which then had to be taken up by the Commission (Bulmer & Wessels, 1987; de Schoutheete, 2012). Recent research on the way in which European Council Conclusions have been used in the decision making process in the EU demonstrates that the body has indeed largely acted as a core ‘political initiator’ via the provision of ‘impulses’ to this process and European Integration generally (Eggermont, 2012: 359).

This dissertation focuses on the European Council as one of the key venues for agenda setting, which is also largely a black box for scholars of EU policy. The main goal of the research is to analyse the allocation of political attention and the determinants thereof. Knowing how the European Council agenda is structured and what actors or conditions can influence it is crucial for grasping the broader agenda-shaping processes in the EU. Moreover, long-term systematic analyses of the patterns of impact are required in order to be able to move away from case study evidence which although providing valuable insights is usually limited by the virtue of its approach. Understanding the way in which agenda setting happens in the European Council is essential for the further study of policy development and decision making in the EU. It will furthermore provide another anchor for interpreting the evolution of the European integration process. But the studies focusing on a *prima facie* unique institution have broader implications also for the literature on issue dynamics. Testing general theories of agenda setting in this context can serve as a further empirical check as well as sketch directions for the expansion of existing theories. The results from analysing agenda determinants for the European Council can set the framework for research on the broader role of such factors in structuring political agendas.

## **Policy Issues and the European Council**

### ***Nature and Composition of the Agenda***

Academic interest in the European Council has thus far been focused mostly on instit-

utional/functional and legal aspects of the evolution of this body.<sup>4</sup> This is not surprising since the European Council was born outside the treaties, remained there for a long time (until the Treaty of Maastricht, 1993), and was listed among the EU institutions only in the Treaty of Lisbon (2009). Consisting of the Heads of State and Government of all member states, the European Council has naturally represented a powerful actor. But the closed meetings with stress on informality have made its agenda setting role go unnoticed for years. Existing research on the European Council analyses thoroughly its establishment, gradual institutionalisation and positioning in the overall EU framework, as well as its functions and powers. Extensive studies appeared first in the 1980s–early 1990s (Bulmer & Wessels, 1987; Johnston, 1994; Taulègne, 1988; Werts, 1992; Wessels, 1980), and recently there has been a revival in the academic interest very much related to the ever increasing role of the body as well as formalisation as an EU institution (Eggermont, 2012; Foret & Rittelmeyer, 2014a; Stäsche, 2011; Werts, 2008).<sup>5</sup>

The first attempt to categorise the issues discussed by the EU leaders at their summits was made in the late 1980s. Bulmer and Wessels argued that there are four types of points which enter the informal agenda: ‘those outstanding from the previous session, important current issues, the priorities of the Presidency-in-office and the proposals of other member governments and of the Commission’ (1987: 52). Bonvicini and Regelsberger (1991) addressed the same categories of topics adding international developments and issues linked to the economic and social situation of the European Community. Yet, the results of these classification attempts constitute a mixture of functional types of issues and substantial policy topics.

A slightly more substantial policy area categorisation has appeared in textbooks on the EU. Nugent (2010) differentiates among six broad topic categories: evolution of the EU, constitutional and institutional points, economic and monetary policies,

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<sup>4</sup> To some extent behavioural characteristics have also been analysed (see e.g. Tallberg’s study on bargaining in the European Council, 2008a).

<sup>5</sup> Some of these manuscripts are the direct result of PhD dissertations (Eggermont, 2012; Stäsche, 2011; Taulègne, 1988; Werts, 1992; Wessels, 1980).

enlargement, external relations, and specific internal policy issues. In recent studies Wessels moves a step further in categorising the activity profile by counting the number of headlines in the Conclusions and dividing them among five types of policy areas – constitutional, socioeconomic, internal, external and other – each consisting of a few subcategories (Wessels, 2008a; Wessels, 2008b). These studies (especially Wessels, 2008a) have increased our knowledge about what issues get access to the European Council agenda. They allow drawing some preliminary conclusions about the extent to which certain topics are addressed (for example, foreign affairs are the most prominent theme) and the temporal developments in attention, which in terms of number of headings do not suggest extreme change.

But these analyses suffer from two measurement shortcomings. First, the counting of headings does not necessarily correspond to the share of overall attention, as sections can differ substantially in size. Second, the approach is based on the issue definitions ascribed by the European Council itself, which might involve bias towards certain terminology. This is especially so because a portion of text often comprises more issues than are actually mentioned in its title, which might lead to omissions (or sometimes also overemphasis). For example, a heading labelled ‘Area of Freedom, Security and Justice’ can include issues such as immigration, terrorism, organised crime, legal cooperation, civil rights, etc. or any combination of these matters with changing contents over time. Therefore, I suggest a new method for analysing the agenda of the European Council by measuring and studying the content of the Conclusions in a much more detailed manner. The empirical approach, which will be explained below, is the basis for all the studies included in this dissertation. It allows undertaking a systematic exploration of the composition of the agenda, and testing hypotheses regarding the nature of attention allocation in longitudinal perspective.

### ***Conditions for Agenda Formation***

While the European Council can and does collectively determine its own agenda, in practice this agenda is a battle field of various interests. Its formulation involves a



complex interplay between actors with different motivations who behave within a framework of information-processing constraints and contextual pressures. The extent to which the agenda can be shaped, i.e. new issues introduced or pre-scheduled ones postponed, depends on a number of factors. They can be broadly grouped in three categories – institutional conditions, external stakeholders' effect and the 'problem stream'.

The first group of factors – the institutional one – comprises both features of the European Council as a policy venue and its institutional environment. We know that EU competencies are hardly a factor here since the European Council has discussed a lot of issues outside Community jurisdictions (see e.g. de Schoutheete, 2012). But institutional role expectations for the EU top body could be more relevant to consider. For example, the fact that the European Council draws the overall directions of EU development might suggest that it preoccupies itself with a narrow set of issues that are core to the existence and functioning of the EU polity, just like executives in nation states would do (Jennings et al., 2011). Individual country preferences are also part of this group, since the European Council is the arena for national interest in the EU. But research shows that coalition building between states can happen on various lines and these are generally unstable (Tallberg & Johansson, 2008; Tallberg, 2008a). Other EU institutions could also attempt to leave their mark on the European Council agenda. In particular, the European Commission might file dossiers at the summits in order to seek political endorsement for its initiatives (Eggermont, 2012).<sup>6</sup> The Council Presidency, which until the entry in force of the Lisbon treaty rotated among the member states, is potentially another institutional access point. The country occupying

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<sup>6</sup> But the pure presence of discussions of such items on the agenda does not preclude that it is the European Council's own preference to address the issues. Thus, estimating the Commission's role in influencing the attention of the top informal institution is empirically extremely challenging.

the office could misuse the chairing role for promoting domestic interests (Elgström & Tallberg, 2003).<sup>7</sup>

The second group of factors underlying the dynamics of agenda formation encompasses external stakeholders. These are actors who are not directly involved with the European Council (as are the member states and the EU institutions) but are nevertheless situated nearby. In this category we could theoretically include organised interests, the media and the general public. Yet, unlike the Commission and the Parliament, and similarly to the Council of Ministers, the European Council is hardly the subject of preference ‘attacks’ by organised interests. It is almost impossible for interests groups to lobby it because of the lack of transparency of the meetings, the consensus decision-making norm, and absence of permanent staff (Hayes-Renshaw, 2009). The influence of the media is also not applicable when we talk about the European Council, and probably to the EU as a whole, since there are no real European level news outlets and national media have diverging agendas. Thus, the only relevant actor here could be the public in terms of some aggregate level of citizens’ preferences in the EU (since there is also no European *demo.s*). The salience of European integration for voters as a dimension additional to the left-right cleavage (Gabel & Hix, 2002; Hix & Lord, 1997) is a reason to believe that citizens actually care about EU policy making and would like to see accountability. Not to mention the fact that a lot of the policies with direct impact on national publics are actually made on EU level. While responsiveness is usually sought in bodies that have legislative functions and can produce substantial policies, besides in effective terms institutions can respond rhetorically by allocating attention to matters of public concerns (see Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008). This kind of responsiveness seems to fit with the role of the European Council in the EU’s institutional framework.

A third group of factors which can structure the allocation of attention is enshrined in what Kingdon (1984) calls the ‘problem stream’. Here various issue indicators can be

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<sup>7</sup> The role of the new permanent President of the European Council also merits special attention. Yet, the office is still relatively new to make empirical analysis which allows for generalisations.

considered, from unemployment to environmental pollution. While such indicators are issue specific and therefore usually have an effect on the attention towards a particular issue, there might be ways to analyse problem indicators' role on a more general level. But an issue is never a problem on its own, it needs to be framed as such by participants in the agenda-setting game. Therefore, some types of indicators might have a higher likelihood of being referred to by the European Council. Another factor in this group is the occurrence of an unexpected sudden event of large scale which has the potential to shake the priorities of the day (Birkland, 1997; 1998). The so-called focusing events or crises might be particularly relevant to study in the framework of the European Council because of its freedom in scheduling meetings and its representative position as an arena for expressing the 'single voice' of the EU. The last element in Kingdon's problem stream, feedback, is not applicable to the European Council agenda due to the institution's distance from policy implementation in the EU.

## **Empirical Approach**

Already in the late 1980s Bulmer and Wessels pointed out that the 'agenda of the European Council plays an underestimated role in relation to the body's performance' (1987: 137). The fact that little advance has been made in analysing this agenda and the processes behind it is a function of the complexity of undertaking such analyses. As Tallberg suggests, the lack of research is generally due to three of the core characteristics of the body: an institution 'that convenes behind closed doors, whose proceedings are undocumented and whose participants are usually hard to gain access to' (2008a: 686). Despite these essential constraints, studying the policy agenda of the European Council is not impossible and core data can be derived from the only existing written account documenting the issues to which the institution has paid attention – the European Council Conclusions.

The Conclusions are not a direct reflection of the points debated at the meetings. Since they often represent 'the lowest common denominator' that is agreeable on

disputable agenda items, these documents are said to conceal divergence of opinions among the Heads of State and Government (Bulmer & Wessels, 1987). But as Westlake and Galloway argue '[w]hat matters to the outside world is not what the European Council thinks, but what it has decided' (2004: 181). This is so because the standing of the Union represented by the European Council is not necessary a reflection of the positions of its individual actors. No matter whether differences between the leaders' views and desires exist or not, what is eventually agreed upon constitutes the position of all of them collectively. Therefore, the Conclusions are a reliable reflection the final agenda of the European Council, close to Kingdon's (1984) definition of the decision agenda. The initial discussion agenda represents the desired points of different actors that are not necessary a reflection of joint auspices. Sometimes the points on the adopted Conclusions might mirror those prepared for discussion. Yet, it is only after the formal approval of the document by the European Council that they can be viewed as the final decision agenda.

The formula of the Conclusions has so far allowed the European Council to keep the balance between confronting the public with the common position of the Union on a number of important topics and not obliging the Member States' governments to follow a particular concrete action in response to the agreed decisions (Werts, 2008). The Conclusions are a way to induce other Community institutions into action or deliberation on specific issues. The General Affairs Council, the Commission and COREPER usually review the results of the meetings directly after the end of a summit (Bonvicini & Regelsberger, 1991). Although the texts cannot be formally seen as instructions to the European Commission<sup>8</sup>, the monopolist on policy proposals in the EU is not free to ignore the Conclusions because of an existing 'underlying power play' (de Schoutheete & Wallace, 2002: 9). Often the European Council's decisions could give green light to an action, which the Commission desires to undertake (van Grinsven, 2003) or require it to rearrange its own agenda. They can also put pressure on the Council of Ministers to speed up decision making on a particular item or provide direction as to what decision should be taken formally by the respective

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<sup>8</sup> According to the treaties, the Commission 'shall neither seek nor take instructions from any Government or other institution, body, office or entity' (Treaty on European Union, 1992).

Council formation (Christoffersen, 2009). Only in the field of foreign policy no further consideration of the Conclusions is envisaged, since the European Council is the final decision maker in this field. Nevertheless, some ‘instructions’ for action of a rather procedural nature could still be referred to the Foreign Affairs Council (Bonvicini & Regelsberger, 1991).

It is important to note some differences in the formal reference to the Conclusions, which have been issued since the first meeting of the European Council in 1975. The London Statement on the Organization of European Council Meetings stipulated that the Conclusions will be issued ‘on the authority of the Presidency’ (Conclusions, June 1977). Therefore they have been mostly entitled ‘Presidency Conclusions’ but this term should not cause confusion, as the texts are ultimately agreed upon by consensus between all members of the European Council and only published by the Presidency. Recently, after a permanent President of the European Council became active, the title of the documents shifted towards European Council Conclusions. In a few cases (especially at informal or extraordinary meetings) a different formulation has been used for a title, e.g. Declaration, and sometimes documents have been issued on behalf of all Heads of State and Government (instead of the European Council). Yet, all these texts have the same standing and are the product of meetings under the same auspices.<sup>9</sup> Therefore all documents are included in the analyses, and for the sake of simplicity, referred to as Conclusions.

The following studies utilise a dataset compiled within the framework of this dissertation project. All Conclusions issued from the first meeting in 1975 until the end of 2012 were content coded using the EU Policy Agendas Project codebook<sup>10</sup> (an EU version of the Comparative Agendas Project codebook). Content analysis of the Conclusions allows for conducting longitudinal inquiries in relation to the policy issues present on the agenda and the level of attention allocated to them. The dataset resulting from this coding enterprise consists of over 44000 (quasi-)sentences which

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<sup>9</sup> A consultation with the Council Secretariat and one of the key experts of the European Council, Jan Werts, has further confirmed this claim.

<sup>10</sup> Available at: [www.policyagendas.eu/codebook](http://www.policyagendas.eu/codebook).

contain a single policy issue each. The issues can be aggregated further to general topic categories, each comprising a number of issues following the codebook. The dataset covers a total of 126 documents released in the 38-year-long period (1975–2012), which featured 154 meetings (i.e. some meetings, especially informal ones, did not produce Conclusions). A detailed account of the meeting dates, places and corresponding Conclusions, as well as respective Presidency-holders is available in Annex 2, presented on half-annual basis. A research note by Alexandrova, Carammia, Princen and Timmermans (2014) published in the journal *European Union Politics* provides an extensive description of the preparation of the overall dataset, its nature and potential uses. Annex 3 of this dissertation presents an overview of the dataset and specifies its application in the different chapters.

## Overview of the Dissertation Contents

The dissertation consists of five separate studies elaborating on the nature and determinants of the European Council agenda. It starts with an empirical overview of the topics addressed by this institution and testing of theories on overall attention dynamics. The research then moves towards incorporating the notion of issue character in an attempt to explain the composition of the agenda. In the following study the role of the EU Council Presidency as a channel of national interest on the European Council agenda is put to test. Then, building on the concept of rhetorical responsiveness the extent to which the EU top institution addresses citizens' concerns is scrutinised. Finally, the power of focusing events to disturb the European Council agenda is estimated and the conditions under which this happens identified. The dissertation concludes with an integrated summary and some reflections.

The first study offers a detailed empirical analysis of the themes on the European Council agenda. Via classifying the issues in standardised topic categories, the overall allocation of attention across these topics and the temporal shifts in it are examined. The analysis then proceeds with testing hypotheses on information processing dynamics. In particular, two sets of hypotheses are posed aiming to apply the theory

of punctuated equilibrium (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005b) and its extension towards attention diversity (Jennings et al., 2011) to the agenda of the European Council. Attention shifts are expected to display a pattern similar to other ‘process agendas’ (i.e. involving both input of information signals and policy output production) and feature many examples at both the positive and negative extremes. The first proposition rests on institutional role perceptions of the European Council as a body which exercises multiple functions related to both policy input and output. It expresses the ‘single voice’ of the EU, takes final decisions on key subjects, initiates new policies, and delegates tasks to the other institutions. The instability of coalitions in the European Council is the basis for expecting major rises in attention to topics as well as complete ignorance of other matters as we move from one meeting to the next. The hypotheses on agenda diversity anticipate increasing agenda fragmentation over time but also some level of alternation between diversity and concentration. The first is likely to happen in effect of the expanding jurisdictional capacity of the EU over the years, whereas an alternation should result from growing institutional complexity related to this deepening of competences as well as the enlargement to more member states.

The second study builds on the general notion that in order to understand the final composition of a political agenda we need to look at various factors related to the participants in the policy process and their environment. Yet, it argues that in practice this model works only if we analyse the appearance of a single issue on the agenda, reflecting the process of issue problematisation. Once our interest lies in explaining the overall agenda we need an intermediary element in the model, and this role can be allocated to the concept of issue character. The study then applies the updated theoretical model to the agenda of the European Council. With the help of statistical techniques for dimensionality reduction, it disentangles what types of issue character underline the attention spread across policy topics. An underlying assumption here is Lowi’s (1964) claim that certain sorts of issue characteristics structure political debates. Yet, this argument is developed further, suggesting that the emphasis on a particular type of issue character can vary over time. This emphasis is influenced by features of the agenda setter, e.g. party political orientation or preferences for integration, and of its context, e.g. institutional constraints, issue indicators, focusing

events, etc. After evaluating the types of issue character that structure the allocation of attention in the European Council, the logic behind temporal changes in the saliency of one of the discovered lines is further scrutinised using data on factors associated with the European Council and its environment.

The third study focuses on the role of a single institutional feature – the rotating Presidency – in European Council agenda setting. With its task to chair the meetings, the Presidency has been considered to have an advantaged position when it comes to deciding what topics should get addresses and how the items on the agenda should be ordered (Johnston, 1994). But empirically the success of misusing this position for one's own benefit is questionable and case studies provide conflicting evidence. For various reasons, e.g. commitment to good reputation, member states might prefer to remain neutral when moderating the discussions at European Council summits. Even if they do not want to keep their national interests aside, the leeway for promoting them might not be so wide. And yet, some member states have been able to advocate particular topics on the European level when occupying the office. Therefore, this study poses the question whether the Presidency provides an institutional advantage in European Council agenda setting. It aims to find out if a member state is more likely to leave an impact on the agenda in line with its domestic position when it is chairing compared to when it is only a 'simple' member. Technically, this is done via combining the data on the European Council agenda with data on executive agendas in five EU member states which have each held the Presidency several times.

The fourth study explores the role of public opinion in agenda formation. Due to its functions and position in the EU institutional architecture, the European Council might be expected to represent a venue for rhetorical responsiveness (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008). This institution might in theory appear as the primary example of the democratic deficit claim due to its distance from the citizens and no direct electoral link with them. But its discretion in picking up issues for discussion might as well equip the European Council with the necessary tool to address citizens' concerns and secure output legitimacy for the EU. The study utilises data on prioritisation of problems by the public in the EU during the last decade and relates this measure to the agenda of the European Council and the attention the institution allocates to the



same issues. The analysis proposes to start with an aggregate framework in order to estimate whether rhetorical responsiveness occurs or not. A positive finding predisposes a further scrutiny of the results in order to confirm the direction of causality and estimate whether the European Council is responsive in all considered issue areas or only to a selection of them.

The fifth study analyses the power of focusing events to set the agenda, or rather upset it since addressing such matters is associated with modifying the agenda last minute. It starts with an exploration of the focusing events that have been addressed at European Council summits over time, estimating their number, type, frequency of appearance, and the share of attention received. The research then moves to the more fundamental questions what determines whether a focusing event is discussed or not, and in case it appears on the agenda what determines how much attention such an item will receive. It is suggested to look at both exogenous and endogenous characteristics viewed from the perspective of the political venue, which takes the decision whether to react to what has happened. Exogenous characteristics comprise event type – manmade versus natural occurrences – and magnitude, in terms of the harm it causes to individuals, infrastructure, etc. Endogenous factors reflect certain relationship between the venue addressing the occurrence and the country/region in which the event takes place (e.g. political or economic ties). They might also include some features of the political agenda on which the event appears (e.g. its carrying capacity). Combining data on various striking sudden occurrences of a large scale and relating it to the focusing events on the European Council agenda, the analysis evaluates which of these factors play a role in deciding which events to discuss and how much attention to award them with.

The conclusion bridges the findings of the five studies and emphasises the empirical and theoretical contributions of the dissertation. It further draws on the implications of the findings for research on the European Council as a policy venue, the broader EU policy-making process, and the construction of policy agendas in political institutions.



## 2. Policy Punctuations and Issue Diversity on the European Council Agenda<sup>11</sup>

Co-authored with Marcello Carammia and Arco Timmermans

### Abstract

The European Council is the highest political body of the EU and the main venue for setting the agenda on high politics. Using a new dataset of all content-coded European Council Conclusions issued between 1975 and 2010, we analyse the policy agenda of the European Council and test hypotheses on agenda change and diversity over time. We find that the theory of punctuated equilibrium applies to the agenda of the European Council, which exhibits a degree of kurtosis similar to that found in policy agendas of other institutions located at the juncture between input and output of the policy process. Throughout the 36-year period, agenda-setting dynamics involved both small changes and major shifts but also more frequent medium-sized negative changes than found elsewhere. Given capacity limits to the agenda, large expansions of attention to topics involved large cuts in attention. Cuts were more often medium in size in order to maintain some level of attention to the topics affected, even though issue disappearance from the European Council agenda has been frequent too. This relates to the functions of the European Council as a venue for high politics, with expectations about issue attention rising with increasing policy jurisdictions throughout the European integration process. Studying dynamics over time, we measured entropy to show how the agenda became more diverse but also displayed episodic concentration in an oscillating pattern. This can be accounted for by the

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<sup>11</sup> Reprinted from Alexandrova, P., Carammia, M., & Timmermans, A. (2012). Policy Punctuations and Issue Diversity on the European Council Agenda. *Policy Studies Journal*, 40(1), 69-88. doi:10.1111/j.1541-0072.2011.00434.x

nature of the European Council as a policy venue: increasing complexity of this institution pushed the members to produce a more diverse agenda, but capacity limits and the need to be responsive to incoming information led to concentration at specific time-points.

## **Introduction**

When the credit crunch hit Europe, it set in motion a rapid wave of attention to financial and economic problems. National governments responded with large-scale bailouts, and this pushed the snowball of economic problems to the European agenda as deficits were rising rapidly and the euro, the symbol of monetary integration, came under so much pressure that experts began to predict its collapse. These signals of alarm made economic governance the top priority of the EU.

Years before this sense of urgency, national governments in the EU followed national budgetary policies, defended national interests, and sometimes even deployed strategies of misinformation about domestic budgetary conditions in order to qualify for the euro, as in the case of Greece. When the rules set by the Stability and Growth Pact of 1997 appeared to be violated, adaptations were made in 2005 not to ensure better enforcement, but to avoid political confrontation between member states. In these years, European policymakers locked on to the indicators allowing maintenance of the deals on budgetary policy. Information signals pointing to more drastic change in attention were mostly filtered out. Only when the signals on budgetary and monetary problems reached extreme levels, European agenda setting began to show the characteristics of disproportionate information processing: deficit issues came to dominate over all other topics, and a drastic new policy design was hammered out during special summit meetings in the spring of 2011.

The shock-like rise in attention to European economic governance is an example of the way in which issues may come and go on the political agenda of the EU. Within the institutional architecture of the Union, the European Council is an arena par excellence for agenda setting on matters of high politics as it brings together the heads

of state or government of all member states. The range of issues that may obtain high political status is enormous, but the capacity of the agenda is limited. Thus, problems compete for attention; they go up and down and on and off the agenda. Capacity limits to the policy agenda stem from cognitive boundaries of policymakers and ways of organizing rationality in information processing. They also depend on the institutional rules of the European Council evolving over time. The European Council not only experienced changes in architecture and procedure, such institutional design choices were themselves matters of high politics on its agenda.

This contribution analyses the allocation of attention to major topics of European policy on the agenda of the European Council since this institution was established in 1974. As a policymaking venue, the European Council has features that make it distinct from most national governments. While protocol often is strict, the European Council has considerable flexibility in determining agenda space and does not face the formal bounds of annual presentation of the policy agenda, as national executives do. Furthermore, the number of state and government leaders gathering in the European Council expanded with EU enlargement, much beyond alterations in the number of cabinet ministers that political parties sometimes make in order to allocate portfolio payoffs. Do these characteristics make a difference to the pattern of agenda setting?

This contribution begins by addressing the position of the European Council in the European institutional framework. Then, we link the study of the European Council agenda with the theory of punctuated equilibrium and cast several expectations about the nature of agenda setting in the European Council. After presenting our data, we map the pattern of attention to major policy topics and move on to analysing the distribution of attention. We first explore the question: How incremental or punctuated are attention changes throughout the period the European Council has been operative? Then, we also look at the scope of the agenda over time and ask under what conditions during its institutional development the European Council agenda concentrates or becomes more fragmented. In our conclusion, we reappraise findings and make some suggestions for further research.

## **The European Council as a Policy Venue**

Within the EU, the European Council is the venue where member states are represented at the highest political level by their head of state or government. In its initial years, the institution was predominantly an arbiter to settle complex political issues among member states, while later it developed more into an agenda setter of the EU (Christoffersen, 2009; de Schoutheete & Wallace, 2002; Werts, 2008). This transformation elevated the European Council to “the apex of the EU institutional system” (Hayes-Renshaw & Wallace, 2006a: 173), functioning as a venue for agenda setting and authoritative decision making on major policy issues, including the institutional architecture of the EU (Wessels, 2008a; 2008b). Treaty revisions and enlargement also are foremost at the table of the European Council, as are appointments for European top positions such as the presidents of the European Commission and the European Central Bank.

The agenda-setting function of the European Council has been the object of a limited but growing scholarly debate. Studies have focused on the sources of agenda-setting power within the institution, in particular the central role of the presidency (Elgström, 2003a; Tallberg, 2003a; 2007) and on factors constraining its ability to steer the agenda (Thomson, 2008). Less is known about the substantive agenda of the European Council. Some studies of agenda content exist, but they focus on single meetings, presidencies, or years of particular historical significance. Systematic analyses of longer time periods of European Council agenda setting are non-existent, besides some reflections on the institution’s action profile within major policy domains (Wessels, 2008a; 2008b).

The agenda-setting and decision-making powers of the European Council are mostly informal and self-designed (de Schoutheete & Wallace, 2002; de Schoutheete, 2006). The European Council does not take part in the “normal” legislative process in which the several Councils of Ministers with their respective policy jurisdictions act together with the European Parliament, following proposals drafted by the European

Commission (Princen, 2009).<sup>12</sup> The European Council plays a coordinating role on such matters across policy jurisdictions or when issues are politically controversial between member states. This role involves creating package deals and “naming and shaming” of states that obstruct agreement. In agenda setting, the European Council indicates directions of general policy development. It usually refrains from producing detailed policy decisions, which it delegates to the Commission and the Council of Ministers or other bodies. These matters are included in the “Conclusions of the Presidency”—the programmatic policy document issued after each formal meeting. Although Conclusions are drafted at an early stage before the meetings are held, the agenda remains responsive to major events that call the attention of the political leaders of the member states.

Conclusions have been issued since the first meeting of the European Council in March 1975. They are the only written evidence of matters discussed and agreed by the heads of state and government, since meetings are held behind closed doors. The Conclusions include statements on international events, policy initiatives on a range of topics, delegation of work to other European institutions, evaluations of progress or stalemate of ongoing policies, etc. In general, Conclusions address a variety of issues within different policy domains, although a few documents adopted at extraordinary meetings have a specific focus (e.g., European response to 9/11, climate change, the economic crisis, and the revolutionary events in North Africa in early 2011). The annual output of Conclusions ranges over time (between two and five per year), as does the total volume of policy statements included in a single Conclusion. There is no clear link between the two.

The openness of the agenda is facilitated by a flexible institutional framework, with no fixed time intervals between meetings and considerable discretion over the size of the agenda. While agenda composition is decided by consensus (Attinà, 2002), the presidency plays an important streamlining role by organizing the meetings and

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<sup>12</sup> In its different formations, the Council of Ministers contains member states’ ministers in specific policy domains such as finance, environment, or justice; in this sense, they have jurisdictions resembling those of the committees in a national legislature.

carefully detecting those topics that the member states wish to address (or avoid). Moreover, until December 2009 when a permanent European Council president was appointed, the meetings were chaired by six-month presidencies, rotating among the member states. This could have added an erratic element to the agenda of the European Council, since different presidencies played their role with different styles and often also sought to uphold their own interests onto the EU agenda (Tallberg, 2003a). However, despite institutional flexibility and even changes in rules to accommodate the increasing number of policy jurisdictions and member states, the growing complexity pushed the political costs of agenda setting and negotiation upward over time.

## **Punctuated Equilibrium and Agenda Dynamics in the European Council**

The theory of punctuated equilibrium posits that agenda setting and policymaking show periods of stability and small adaptations but also involve larger shifts in which the agenda is reset more radically. Such shifts follow after information signals increase in magnitude and cascade in the social and political environment—just as happened with monetary and budgetary policy in the EU after national governments responded to financial market failure. As Jones and Baumgartner (2005a: 336) put it: “decision makers in politics will not cling forever to bad information, but they undoubtedly believe it far beyond its utility.” Disproportionate information processing adds an erratic element to the political agenda when analysed over longer time periods.

Institutional friction may reinforce this episodic alternation between stability and drastic change. It occurs when the characteristics of a policymaking arena raise the political costs of changes in attention. Such costs stem from rules for making decisions, and negotiating and enforcing political deals (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005a; 2005b). Institutional rules thus create thresholds for change; they are often designed in a way that prevents policymaking from becoming too volatile. Constitutional designs of separation of powers and rules of unanimity or qualified majority have precisely



this function. Complex institutions involve institutional and political costs that inhibit easy disruptions of priorities once they are set. This may be enabled by design, but it also may be an unintended consequence of institutional development.

While early studies of punctuated equilibrium were based on the U.S. case only, the more recent turn toward the comparative study of agenda setting allowed broader systematic analysis of the conditions for punctuated equilibrium, and shed new light on how institutional design may affect policy change (Baumgartner et al., 2009). Recent work has shown that increasing levels of friction downstream in the policy process make these agendas significantly more susceptible to punctuated equilibrium. Policy input agendas of media, interest groups, and public opinion generally involve lower thresholds for change. They are thus more adaptive than policy process agendas (parliamentary questions, hearings, debates in legislatures, and executive policy programs), while policy output agendas (legislation and budget decisions) are the stickiest. Therefore, changes in attention become increasingly deviant from the normal model of frequency distribution as agendas get closer to policy output (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Jones, Sulkin, & Larsen, 2003; Jones et al., 2009).

The European Council is a complex body that sits not only at the input side of the European policy process—initiating new policies and expressing the “voice” of the Union—but also decides on institutional architecture, delegates tasks to other institutions, and takes a prominent role in policy coordination and conflict arbitration. For this reason, we may expect that the agenda of the European Council displays shifts in attention to problems comparable with policy agendas at the process stage in a political system, converting input signals into policy output. In particular, the long-term policy agenda of the European Council should show a punctuated pattern of policy change, although these attention shifts should not be heavily punctuated. The degree of attention shifts is expected to be lower than for output agendas and higher than for input agendas.

*Hypothesis 1: The European Council agenda displays attention shifts involving a degree of punctuation similar to other policy process agendas in political systems.*

Furthermore, the institutional profile of the European Council as an agenda setter on matters of high politics involves marked choices and priorities. The carrying capacity of an agenda-setting institution for matters of dramatic content and expression is more limited than for matters that are low key. Baumgartner and Jones (1993) show how in the United States issue expansion from policy subsystems to “macropolitical” institutions sparks shifts from stability to dramatic change. The European Council absorbs such dramatic matters as it is the locus for coordination, arbitration, and redesign of vital institutional structures and rules in the EU.

Prioritizing and redefining an issue involves actor mobilization (Baumgartner & Jones, 2005). For the European Council, mobilization often increases the costs of coalition building. It can occur within the institution or be the outcome of complex two-level games between European institutions and member states (Moravcsik, 1993; Putnam, 1988); or, conversely, it can be path dependent following previous choices in addressing the issue. However, coalitions usually are not stable over time; they are realigned frequently. This may lead not only to a pattern of rise and fall of issues on the agenda but also to issues entering and entirely leaving the agenda. For these reasons, despite the flexibility in agenda capacity, we expect that large attention changes are both positive and negative. If major topics are propelled to the top of the agenda, others are squeezed out. Thus, our second hypothesis is:

*Hypothesis 2: The European Council agenda shows both major positive and major negative attention changes.*

Recent research on agenda setting provided clearer evidence for varying levels of diversity and scope of policy agendas over time (e.g. Jennings et al., 2011; John & Jennings, 2010). Punctuated equilibrium theory posits that venues in a political system are linked, with policy ideas traveling across venue boundaries (Baumgartner & Jones, 2005; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005b). This suggests that an expansion in the scope of issues relevant for any venue of the system is likely to spill over to other policy venues. In the EU, the expansion of the set of jurisdictions has followed successive “corridors” of treaty reform (see also Moravcsik, 1993; Wessels, 2008b), as well as European Court of Justice rulings and path-dependent institutional change (Pierson,

1996). Beside shifts involving some topics being elevated and others crowded out, the political consequence of expanding jurisdictional boundaries in the EU is likely to be an increase in agenda diversity.

*Hypothesis 3: The European Council agenda shows increasing diversity over time.*

The analysis of agenda development in terms of expansion and concentration takes us right into the dynamics of European Council policymaking. The broadening range of EU decision-making powers and the growing number of member states following several rounds of enlargement brought more institutional complexity. While hypothesis 3 expects increasing diversity of the agenda over a long time period, rising complexity and institutional development are likely to add conflicting pressures. The multiple roles of the European Council in the EU political system involve not only a demand for attention to many issues and for policy coordination, but also the need for quick response to focusing events that give particular matters a sense of urgency. Institutional complexity limits the capacity to process many information signals in parallel. While many issues are expected to be addressed, not all of these matters can acquire urgent status in a complex institution where friction in information processing and costs of making decisions on priorities are high (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005a). For these reasons, we expect the European Council agenda to show a pattern in which expansion of the agenda to multiple topics alternates with concentration of attention on fewer topics.

*Hypothesis 4: The European Council agenda exhibits a pattern of alternation between concentration and expansion.*

Before testing the validity of these hypotheses, we describe the data collected for the analysis of the European Council agenda and provide an overview of the topics on the agenda.

## **Data and Method**

Our empirical analysis is based on an original dataset containing all European Council Conclusions issued since March 1975, when this body first met as a formal institution and produced a substantive Conclusion. The dataset consists of 112 Conclusions, the last one issued in December 2010. All documents were content coded using an EU version of the standardized codebook of the Comparative Agendas Project. The EU codebook contains 21 policy topics,<sup>13</sup> and each of these a number of subtopics.<sup>14</sup> All Conclusions were coded<sup>15</sup> on the level of sentences and quasi-sentences, the latter being all parts of a sentence that include autonomous policy content and can be meaningfully split. One code is attached to each single unit of analysis.<sup>16</sup> The codes make no reference to tone or direction of activity; they only denote the policy field discussed by the EU leaders.

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<sup>13</sup> The major policy topic codes of the EU codebook are: 1. Macroeconomics; 2. Civil Rights, Minority Issues, and Civil Liberties; 3. Health; 4. Agriculture and Fisheries; 5. Labour and Employment; 6. Education; 7. Environment; 8. Energy; 9. Immigration; 10. Transportation; 12. Law and Crime; 13. Social Policy; 14. Regional and Urban Policy and Planning; 15. Banking, Finance, and Internal Trade; 16. Defence; 17. Space, Science, Technology, and Communications; 18. Foreign Trade; 19. International Affairs and Foreign Aid; 20. EU Governance; 21. Public Lands and Water Management; and 23. Culture.

<sup>14</sup> For example, the major category macroeconomics includes budget and debt, inflation, monetary policy, etc.

<sup>15</sup> The coding process was conducted simultaneously by two teams in Italy and the Netherlands. Student coders worked in pairs, coding each document first individually and then checking for disagreements and agreeing on final codes whenever differences existed. Finally, the supervisors of the project in both countries verified the assigned codes and discussed complex cases between themselves and in a broader group of scholars working within the Comparative Policy Agendas Project.

<sup>16</sup> Whenever possible, a subtopic code has been allocated, but in many cases due to the general ideas stated, major topic code has been necessary. For the purpose of this article, all subtopic codes have been aggregated to the major topic level in order to simplify the picture and allow for broad analysis.

The dataset contains over 40,000 coded statements. Within this total volume, 97 per cent was actually content coded, while the remaining 3 per cent did not have any policy content. This proportion is comparable with the share of substantive content of policy documents found in analyses of national executive agendas (e.g. Breeman et al., 2009; Jennings et al., 2011; John & Jennings, 2010). In choosing our time interval for measuring the allocation of attention, we had three possibilities: analyse single European Council Conclusions, aggregate documents for six-month presidency terms, or analyse from year to year. We study agenda development from year to year, which makes the results comparable with empirical work on other policy agendas.

## **Attention Allocation across Topics**

The allocation of attention across topics (table 2.1) clearly shows some major emphases reflecting the nature of the European Council as an EU institution. Its foremost direction of activity—i.e., the adoption of common positions and coordination of activities in international affairs, as self-defined in the Paris Communiqué of 1974—is also the major topic on the agenda. Foreign affairs cover almost one fourth of the agenda space of the formal meetings of EU leaders. More than half of these references are general statements about EU relations with third states or international organizations. Other prominent issues are EU enlargement, international economic development, foreign aid, and human rights. Macroeconomics, the traditional field of European integration, comes second with approximately 15 per cent of the total attention. Here, again, general references are most frequent, but more specific mentions of budget and debt and monetary policy are also prominent. The third largest topic is governance, covering some 10 per cent of the agenda space. As the European Council also convenes Inter-Governmental Conferences to change EU treaties, having a significant stake in this domain is not surprising. The variety of governance issues on the agenda is wider than that within the fields of foreign policy and macroeconomics. The Conclusions make frequent references to EU treaties, government efficiency, institutions and intra-institutional relationships, and relations between the member states and the Union.

<b>Policy field</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
International affairs	9410	23,76%
Macroeconomics	5853	14,78%
Governance and government operations	4260	10,76%
Defence	3000	7,57%
Banking, finance and internal trade	2550	6,44%
Employment	1671	4,22%
Law and crime	1635	4,13%
Environment	1620	4,09%
Civil rights and liberties	1374	3,47%
Immigration	1352	3,41%
Remaining 11 policy fields (less than 3% each)	6880	17,37%
All	39605	100%

Table 2.1. Aggregated attention to policy fields (1975–2010)

Taken together, the three topics of foreign affairs, macroeconomics, and EU governance attracted almost half of the whole attention of the European Council over the entire 36-year period. The remaining policy fields were given between approximately 7 and <1 per cent of the agenda space.

Some topics are clearly much more prominent than others in the general picture of all aggregated agendas between 1975 and 2010. To consider continuity and change in the agenda of the European Council, we explore how the allocation of attention to policy fields varies from one year to the next. Figure 2.1 shows the proportion of attention to the three most prominent topics relative to all other topics, measured as a percentage of the total annual agenda. The share of attention attracted by the three dominant policy fields varies over time between 27 and 77 per cent. It was at points when these topics attracted less attention that space was opened for other themes—in particular energy, environment, transport, immigration, and internal trade. Among the remaining fields, some received more attention over time, others showed a pattern of rise and decline, and still others, notably agriculture, became less visible. A few topics, such as science and technology, social policy, and foreign trade, nearly always had low access

to the European Council agenda. These observations seem to point to a punctuated pattern of issue attention change over time.

## **Distribution of Attention Change**

In order to measure the degree of punctuation on the European Council agenda, we calculate change scores in the attention devoted to each of the policy topics from one year to the next. We use a “percentage-percentage method” and replicate this measurement for all years to generate the distribution of yearly change scores.<sup>17</sup> Our first hypothesis is that the European Council should show a pattern of attention change similar to other “policy process agendas” of national executives, which is observed statistically as a mild level of leptokurtosis. Leptokurtosis is a change pattern in which very small and very large changes occur, while medium-size changes are less frequent. Furthermore, Hypothesis 2 posits that changes in attention involve both major negative and positive shifts.

Table 2.2, which includes summary statistics about attention changes in the agenda of the European Council, shows that these range between a minimum of -1 (a 100 per cent decrease in attention to selected topics that we find when a topic which received

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<sup>17</sup> There are several ways to calculate change scores (see Jones et al., 2003: 168 for a discussion). We use the “percentage-percentage method”, that is, we calculate the percentage of the total agenda covered by a single issue area and then calculate the difference from the same percentage in the preceding year: (percentage at time 2—percentage at time 1)/percentage at time 1. In computing changes based on percentages rather than counts, we move from the assumption that the total size of the agenda is constant. Theoretical and empirical reasons could suggest differently, i.e., the size of the European Council agenda may well increase over time. However, we stick to percentage–percentage change because the results are more easily observable. It is worth noting that this choice does not invalidate our results; quite the opposite indeed, as kurtosis is more reliably estimated based on percentage–percentage change.

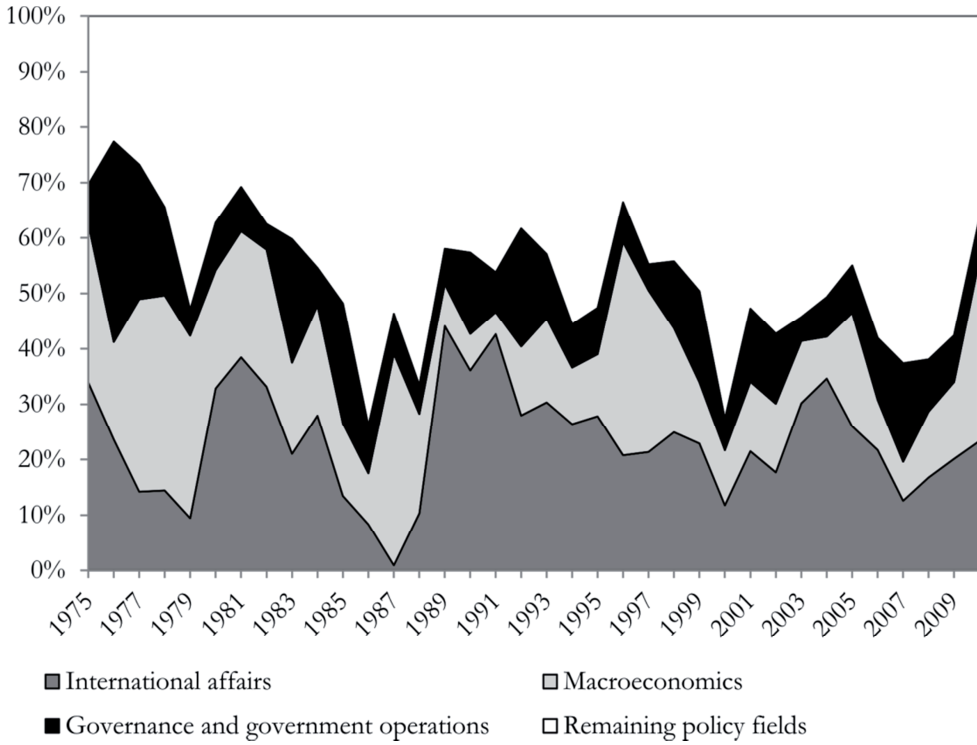


Figure 2.1. Relative distribution of attention to policy topics per year (1975–2010)

Min.	-1.0000
1st Qu.	-0.4856
Median	-0.1073
Mean	0.5384
3rd Qu.	0.6736
Max.	29.7966
SD	2.459709
Kurtosis	17.26160
L2 (l-scale)	0.8526169
L3 (l-skewness)	0.4307864
L4 (l-kurtosis)	0.3319330

Table 2.2. Statistics on agenda change



attention in the agenda at  $t_0$  goes out of the agenda at  $t_1$ ) to a maximum of 29.8 (a 2980 per cent increase in attention). The mean change is 0.54, which indicates that attention shifts from one year to the next are 54 per cent on average, with a standard deviation of 2.46.

The shape of a distribution can be estimated by calculating the level of kurtosis, which is a ratio between the fourth moment of a distribution and its squared variance. Following punctuated equilibrium theory, we should find a leptokurtic distribution of attention changes,<sup>18</sup> and based on H1 we expect to find a mild level of leptokurtosis in the European Council agenda. To analyse the shape of the distribution, we use L-kurtosis, a measure less sensible to extreme values (Breunig & Jones, 2011). A normal distribution has an L-kurtosis of 0.123, with lower values indicating platykurtic and higher values leptokurtic distributions.

The value of L-kurtosis in the distribution of changes on the European Council agenda is 0.33, which denotes a mild level of leptokurtosis in comparison with other political institutions (Baumgartner et al., 2009: 612). In line with hypothesis 1, this level is higher than typical input agendas but lower than output agendas. The observed mildly leptokurtic pattern of attention change is similar to that of, for example, hearings in the U.S. House and Senate, parliamentary interpellations in Denmark, and also approximates the L-kurtosis level for interparty policy agreements in Belgium (Baumgartner et al., 2009). Thus, the nature of attention change on the European Council agenda is comparable with that of other agendas located around the middle point of the policy process, where inputs are converted into outputs.

By ranking changes in order of magnitude and plotting them in a histogram, we can observe the shape of the distribution of change scores (figure 2.2). The X-axis displays the scale of percentage changes, ranging between -1 (-100 per cent for issues entirely disappearing from the agenda) and +5 (showing all instances of attention shifts of 500

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<sup>18</sup> A leptokurtic distribution is a distribution that, compared with Gaussian distributions, has a slender peak with many very small changes or no change at all (0 points), weak shoulders (indicating a low number of moderate changes), and fat tails (a higher number of radical changes than in the normal distribution).

per cent or more). The bars in the histogram represent tabulated frequencies. The black line shows the normal distribution.

As posited in hypothesis 2, the European Council agenda is expected to exhibit both large positive and large negative attention shifts. Figure 2.2 shows a high amount of changes at both ends of the scale, in line with our prediction. The occurrence of drastic cuts in attention, even back to zero (the left side of the histogram), cannot be

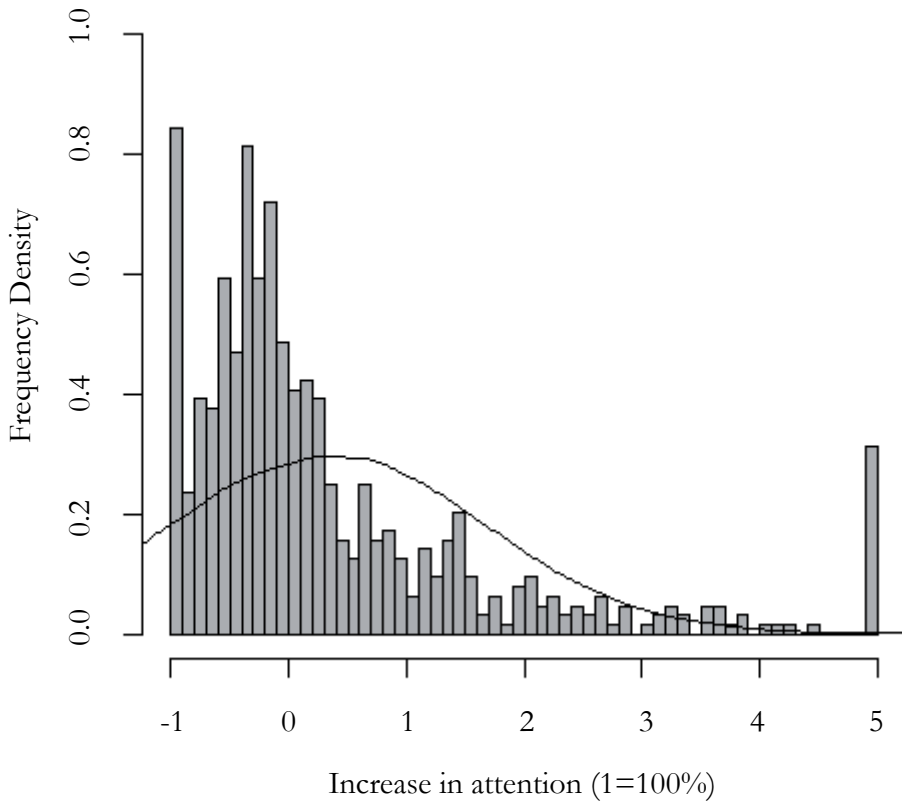


Figure 2.2. Distribution of percentage attention change

found in all types of policy agendas.<sup>19</sup> With budgets, for example, it is quite exceptional to find cuts in spending on topics to zero from one year to the next (Breunig, 2006; Jones et al., 2009), and legislative production also displays fewer of such politically costly attention cuts (Brouard et al., 2009). In contrast, in European Council agenda setting, the frequency of issues dropping off the agenda entirely is quite high. Also, medium-sized cuts in attention (between -30 per cent and -80 per cent) from one year to the next are rather frequent. This gives the frequency distribution of attention change in the European Council a “Quasimodo” type of shape, with one shoulder peaking out.

The policy agenda of the European Council seems more volatile than what is usually observed in other institutions. This may be related to specific institutional properties of the European Council such as the mechanism of the rotating presidency that can provide an incentive for resetting the agenda to uphold single member states’ priorities every 6 months. More generally, however, high agenda volatility seems consistent with the European Council as a high politics venue, where different coalitions are built among the EU leaders over time. Cutting policy areas out from budgets is politically costly because it involves terminating entire policy programs. Conversely, reallocating attention within European Council Conclusions may be positive sum because space is opened for “new” issues when “old” ones can just be delegated to the micro level and thus processed further by other institutions. Hence, in principle, issue disappearance from the European Council agenda may pave the way to an increase, rather than a reduction, of policy activity. The major three themes of international affairs, macroeconomics, and EU governance were never sacrificed entirely for other matters, but most of the remaining 18 topics disappeared from the agenda several times. Such resetting of issues allowed the large expansion of attention to topics visible in the right-hand tail of Figure 2.2. Increases of 500 per cent or more were made when issues intruded on the agenda with a particular sense of urgency, a feature common to almost all topics but at different moments. For making such

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<sup>19</sup> Due to the particular features of the model calculation, in mathematical terms the negative scores are limited to the value of -1 as the lowest, whereas the positive values can take any number from above zero to infinity.

drastic emphasis choices, the political leaders of the EU member states often reduced the relative attention to several other topics substantially, or dropped topics entirely.

## **Agenda Concentration and Diversity**

The interaction between cuts and increases of political attention to selected topics becomes more evident when analysed over time. The leptokurtic distribution of attention change presented above depicts only a generalized image of the shifts in emphasis on all policy fields from one year to the next. Thus, while punctuations can be seen as “significant break points in the degree of attention,” a different measure is required to get a more detailed view of how attention develops in the long run (John & Jennings, 2010: 579).

Based on the institutional characteristics of the European Council and the wider framework in which it functions, and building on existing research on punctuated equilibrium, we formulated two hypotheses on agenda development over time. Our third hypothesis states that expanding policy jurisdiction since 1975 has pushed the European Council agenda toward more diversity. Yet EU enlargements, the position of the institution with its radar for matters of high politics, and the need to show responsiveness to incoming information and focusing events also involve a pressure for focus, which should push the agenda toward more concentration. While state and government leaders assembling in the European Council may attempt to balance these different forces, our fourth hypothesis is that agenda diversity and concentration occur in alternation.

To test these two hypotheses, we measure the level of agenda entropy. Derived from Boltzman’s work on thermodynamics and statistical mechanics and Shannon’s information theory, the measure of entropy has been applied to a number of fields (for an overview see Bailey, 1983). In agenda-setting research, entropy captures the degree to which attention to problems is concentrated on one (low entropy) or dispersed among many different topics (high entropy). Policy agendas researchers

have applied the concept using the Shannon Diversity Index (H)<sup>20</sup> (Jennings, Bevan, & John, 2011; Jennings et al., 2011; John & Jennings, 2010). Shannon's H (also known as Shannon-Wiener Index) is considered a powerful measure of entropy for data with low levels of concentration (John & Jennings, 2010: 579), as is expected to be found in the agenda of policymaking institutions.<sup>21</sup> The higher the value of entropy, the more attention is spread in equal portions between different topics. The maximum value of the Shannon's H statistic depends on the total number of categories used for measuring diversity. Our analysis includes 21 policy fields, which renders a maximum entropy value of 3.0445 that would be found in case of equidistribution of attention across policy sectors.<sup>22</sup> Conversely, an entropy value of 0 would be observed if the whole attention was concentrated on a single issue. Both the minimum and the maximum possible values are extremes, which are rarely observed in social systems; entropy mostly fluctuates around intermediate levels (Bailey, 1983).

Figure 2.3 shows change in entropy over time in the agenda of the European Council from 1975 to 2010. The average entropy score is 2.25, but the trend line shows a rising average entropy level from below 2 to above 2.5 in recent years. This provides empirical support for our third hypothesis expecting increasing issue diversity in the European Council over time. The number of topics on the agenda rose up as the EU political system evolved.

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<sup>20</sup> The H-Statistic is calculated by the following formula:

$$H = - \sum_{i=1}^n p(x_i) \log p(x_i)$$

where  $p(x)$  is the probability function of an outcome  $x_i$  ( $i$  being a integer from 1 to  $n$ ), and  $n$  is the number of policy topics. Since the probability function is always negative, the product of  $p_i$  and the natural logarithm of  $p_i$  is multiplied by minus 1. The total entropy of the agenda in a given point of time is the sum of all H-calculations for every policy topic.

<sup>21</sup> Another possible way of measuring agenda diversity is through the Herfindahl index (Breeman et al., 2009).

<sup>22</sup> The maximum value is achieved when all probabilities are the same and represents the natural logarithm of the total number of policy fields, i.e.,  $H = \log n$ .

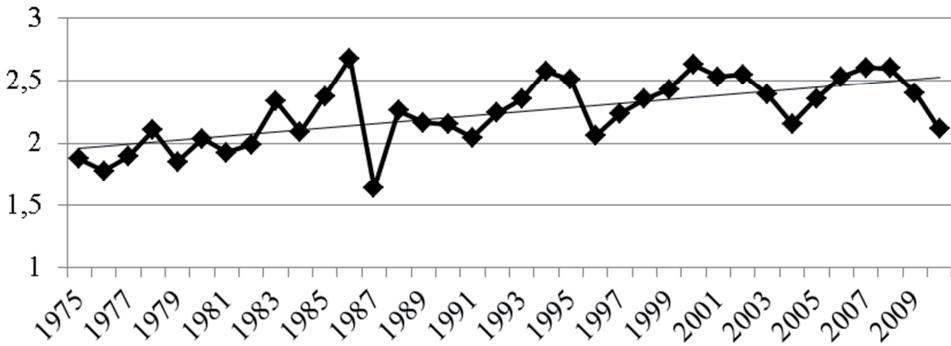


Figure 2.3. Agenda entropy per year (1975–2010)

While the scope of the European Council agenda increased, sharp rises and falls in attention to single topics also occurred. Our fourth hypothesis goes into the dynamics of the European Council experiencing conflicting pressures for spreading and focusing (or refocusing) attention. From its establishment until the adoption of the Single European Act in 1986, the European Council was subject to increasing institutionalization. In this period, new policy topics were added to the agenda and, as Figure 2.3 displays, entropy increased overall—reaching a score of 2.68 in 1986, the highest point for the entire period. Then, in 1987, the agenda showed a drastic but temporary concentration, as visible in the lowest entropy score of 1.64. This was a year of major political disagreement within the European Council, as state and government leaders were focusing on distributive and redistributive matters—such as general budgetary policy, structural funds, and spending on agriculture—and could agree on just one issued Conclusion. Attention to international affairs was low in this year (less than 1 per cent). This concentration on EU distributional policy showed major political concerns with the implementation of the Single European Act.

Since then and even more after the Maastricht Treaty establishing a formal Union in 1992, the distribution of attention shows an oscillating pattern: it evolved from concentration to diversity and then back to concentration. Agenda concentration, however, involved fewer instances of topics being dropped entirely from the agenda.

This suggests that expanding jurisdiction required the EU to deal with a wider agenda, while the successive rounds of enlargement in 1995, 2004, and 2007 increased the cost of drastic cuts. Nonetheless, episodic shifts in attention occurred, leading to periods where the agenda concentrated more. From the early 1990s, three patterns of increasing and decreasing agenda diversity appear in cycles of 6–9 years. In this period, the general trend is still toward rising entropy, but the weaving pattern oscillates around this trend. In recent years, the slope of the trend line was reduced to become almost flat, indicating that the expansion of the policy scope of the EU reached its political endpoint so far. We can thus conclude that our findings provide partial support for hypothesis 4. Indeed, the agenda exhibited a pattern of alternating periods of concentration and expansion, yet it did so only since the 1990s. In earlier years, European Council Conclusions rapidly became more diverse, which speaks to the expansion of policy jurisdictions of the European institutions culminating in an apparent “normalization” of agenda-setting processes after dramatic changes affected the design of the EU political system in the early 1990s.

An increase in the frequency of European Council meetings and the subsequent production of more Conclusions, in particular since the 2000s, allowed this body to become more responsive to events while limiting the number of topics that were dropped and remained unattended for entire years. However, despite this increased capacity of varying and shifting topics within years, the oscillatory nature of agenda diversity may indicate that, as an institution for high politics, the European Council has become more exposed to pressures for absorbing many matters to meet member states’ expectations and incoming information calls for resetting policy priorities. Institutional flexibility thus facilitated parallel processing and a spread of attention, as visible in our findings. Yet, at different points in time, the European Council had to shift to serial processing in order to address issues of particular urgency.

## **Diversity and Issue Competition**

The increase in agenda diversity within cycles of more and less concentration requires

further explanation. Could specific topics be responsible for this pattern? Recent analysis of national executive agendas shows that some “core” issues condition attention to other matters: when core issues become highly salient, little space is left for other problems (Jennings et al., 2011). In this sense, noncore topics must compete for attention amongst themselves, but they need to compete with core issues in the first place. Our findings on the European Council agenda suggest a similar effect: in the competition for agenda space, economics, foreign affairs, and EU governance condition the access of other topics to the agenda.

Figure 2.4 shows the pattern of relative attention to the three major topics (left scale) plotted against the entropy graph (right scale). Although the two represent different measures, a comparison is justified as entropy considers the dispersion of attention across the whole agenda and not topic by topic. For example, suppose that in 2 years the agenda contained just two policy fields: A and B. In year<sub>0</sub>, topic A gained 20 per cent of the attention and B 80 per cent, whereas in year<sub>1</sub> the reverse occurred—A getting 80 per cent and B getting 20 per cent. Eventually, the entropy score for both years is the same, even though different topics occupied more and less attention in the two cases. Therefore, juxtaposing the entropy values to the share of attention spent to the core issues versus the remaining ones allows us to draw conclusions on the relationship between the two. Moreover, while for some agendas, changes in entropy and relative attention may still be inversely related almost by definition, this is not the case for the European Council because its agenda is extremely flexible in length: if the European Council wants to expand agenda space for all topics, it can just issue longer Conclusions—as sometimes actually happened. It is the consequence of a political choice when this does not occur, and attention is reallocated onto some issues to the detriment of others.

In most of the years displaying increasing entropy, the total attention captured by the three core issues went down on the European Council agenda. The decline of core issues left more space open for the other topics to compete for attention and, eventually, a higher number actually reached the agenda. The opposite also seems to hold: at times when entropy scores were low, macroeconomics, foreign affairs, and governance were quite dominant together, taking half of the agenda or even more.



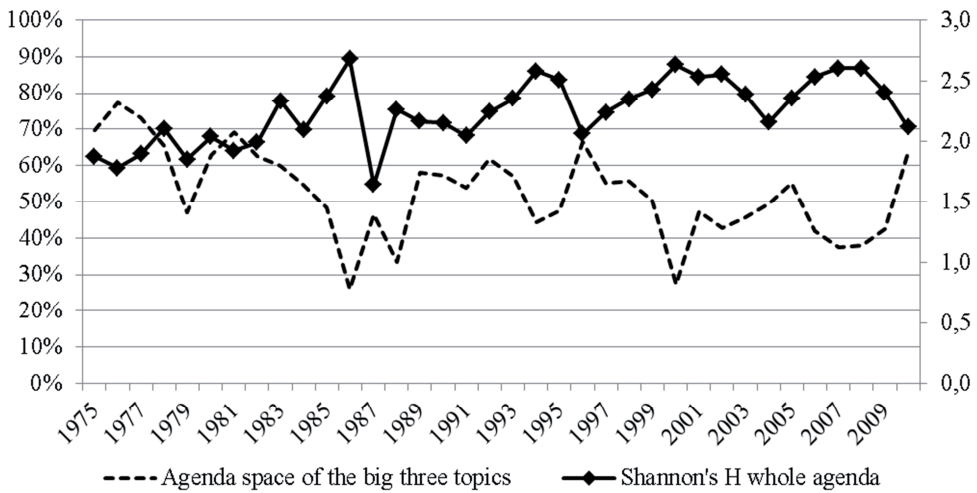


Figure 2.4. Entropy and proportion of attention to the three core topics

When core issues were relatively less prominent, they opened space for noncore issues, although some benefited more than others. During years of high saliency of the economy, foreign affairs, and governance, competition between noncore issues became more intense, and some topics were even entirely squeezed out. A closer look at the data shows how, since the 1990s, the core topics went up and down in salience together. The proportions of attention did not vary much between them; it was the other topics that contributed mostly to the variation in entropy over time.

Recurring shifts from less diversity to more and then back to a more concentrated agenda may also stem from the institutional characteristics of the European Council and its leeway in setting the size and content of the agenda. Our data tell us that reduced diversity appears at times when the total volume of the agenda contracts. Increases in diversity occur when the production of statements in written Conclusions goes up. Thus, the more words the EU leaders are devoting to matters placed on the agenda, the broader the variety of the issues on this agenda. Conversely, as the political leaders of the EU member states decide to limit the agenda, they also make more drastic choices on attention to issues not belonging to the core themes. Yet,

when the total space for items on the agenda goes up or down, in general, the attention to the three big issues rises or declines as much as the attention to the remaining ones.

## **Conclusion**

Shortly after its first meeting in 1975, the European Council was recognized as the central venue for European high politics (Wessels, 1980). Its agenda has several functions in EU institutional design and policymaking that underline its central position between other European policymaking bodies (Bulmer & Wessels, 1987). Studies of the EU often emphasize the special or even “unique” character of its political system and the policymaking institutions of which it consists. Do the institutional properties of the European Council as it evolved set this agenda-setting body apart as a special case? Or does it show patterns similar to national policymaking institutions, on which empirical analyses thus far provide evidence for the theory of punctuated equilibrium?

In this article, we systematically analysed the European Council agenda from the moment this institution became operative until the end of 2010. In this entire period of incumbency, the European Council experienced significant expansion of policy jurisdictions and considerable enlargement, from 9 member states in 1975 to 27 member states in 2010. Institutional redesign of the European Council was an important topic on its own agenda between other matters of high politics, most of all international affairs and macroeconomics. We categorized these three and 18 other major topics represented on the agenda and placed them in a long-term perspective in order to analyse agenda dynamics. We presented four hypotheses to examine the overall pattern of changes in attention and to see how the composition of the agenda evolved over time along with the growing complexity of the European Council and its political environment in the EU. Table 2.3 summarizes our hypotheses and findings.

	<b>Hypothesis: The European Council's agenda...</b>	<b>Test</b>	<b>Result</b>
1	...displays a medium level of kurtosis, similar to other process agendas in political systems.	Distribution of attention change	confirmed
2	...involves both positive and negative big attention changes in its pattern of punctuations.	(percentage-percentage method)	confirmed
3	...shows increasing diversity over time.	Entropy	confirmed
4	...exhibits a pattern of alternating periods of concentration and expansion.	(Shannon's H)	partially confirmed

Table 2.3. Summary of expectations and results

Most of the time, the European Council discussed issues of foreign policy, macroeconomics, and EU governance—core issues that relate to basic functions of government. In this sense, the European Council mirrors national executives. The remaining part of the overall volume of attention—at times less than half of it—was distributed to many other policy topics. It did this in portions that varied from one year to the next. Observing both large increases and decreases of attention to topics on the European Council agenda, we found strong evidence for the theory of punctuated equilibrium. The degree of kurtosis corresponds to other recent findings on policy process agendas such as hearings in the U.S. Congress and parliamentary debates and coalition agreements in multiparty parliamentary systems (Baumgartner et al., 2009).

We also observed something less visible in policy agendas research thus far. While policy agendas in countries often display a high frequency around the zero point—small or very small change—this was not very prominent for the European Council. There were far more medium-sized negative changes than medium-sized positive changes. The leptokurtic frequency distribution of attention changes on the European Council agenda not only shows fat tails but also one peaking shoulder. By analysing agenda concentration and diversity over time, we followed the pattern of topic attention and attention change in the 36-year period more closely. Using an entropy measure, we found that after a period of expansion in scope until the Single European

Act of 1986, and especially since the early 1990s, agenda composition began to alternate between more and less diversity in an oscillating pattern. In periods of higher diversity, the core topics of economics, international affairs, and European governance were less salient, leaving agenda space to other matters. While not all of these attention shifts were marked punctuations, the findings on the frequency of change and the oscillating pattern over time are consistent.

Thus, while the European Council is part of a political system with institutional features not existing elsewhere, these features channel rather than suppress the forces at work in information processing and setting the policy agenda. The theory of punctuated equilibrium helps us to get a better understanding of formal and informal mechanisms in agenda setting in the EU venue. Our measure of entropy for analysing trends over time extends this theoretical lens. We see several further steps in this direction of research on the policy process in the EU. In what ways do presidencies affect the European Council agenda in the long run? What is the effect on the formal agenda of the increased practice of organizing informal meetings to address specific and often urgent problems? What is the role of the European Council in delegating issues to other policy venues? At which times during issue attention cycles does such delegation happen—and appear effective or ineffective? Further research on these questions involving systematic empirical analysis will contribute significantly to a better understanding of policymaking in the EU.

### **3. Explaining Political Attention Allocation with the Help of Issue Character: Evidence from the European Council**

#### **Abstract**

Policy issues compete for the attention of political actors and the size of the agenda an issue can occupy is largely determined by the way in which it is defined. This logic constitutes a simple agenda-setting model in which factors related to the participants in the policy process and their context influence the attention a single issue receives after being problematised. In order to be able to apply this model to the construction of a whole agenda, we need to incorporate an intermediate step. This study proposes to do so by incorporating the notion of issue character and offers an empirical application of the adapted model to the European Council, a crucial informal player in EU agenda setting. Using a dimensionality reduction technique, the composition of the agenda is broken down to two constitutive dimensions – core vs. non-core themes of government and economic vs. non-economic character. Since the first structuring element is in line with existing knowledge and the role expectations for the European Council, the analysis concentrates on the second type. Changing levels of saliency of economic issue character of the agenda are used as a dependent variable in a model including predictors related to the nature of the institution and contextual factors. The results show that leftist European Council party ideology and growing government deficit in the EU contribute to increasing prominence of the economic dimension, which in turn explains rising levels in attention to various issues, especially of the non-core themes type.

## **Introduction**

A key notion of agenda-setting theory holds that attention of political actors is always scarce and issues compete for access to the agenda (Jones, 2001; Kingdon, 1984). This results in erratic pattern of attention shifts across topics over long time periods and disproportionate representation of various matters on the agenda. The chance of success of a single issue is seen as conditional upon various factors, ranging from preferences of political actors, through institutional architectures, to external events (see e.g. Birkland, 1997; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Talbert & Potoski, 2002). The mechanism via which changes on the agenda occur is rooted in recognition and interpretation of new information, or in other words the intrusion of new issues or new attributes of existing issues (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005b). Attribute intrusion in practice means redefining an issue in light of the emergence of a dimension of policy making, which has previously not been considered relevant. This can be seen as a synonym of framing – the primary framework through which an issue is perceived is used to describe this issue (Goffman, 1974).

The idea that every matter placed on the political agenda is wrapped in attributed meanings, ascribed by the actors involved in the agenda setting battle, has been intensively analysed across various domains (e.g. Jeon & Haider-Markel, 2001; Plein, 1991; Scholten & Timmermans, 2010; Strom & Cook, 2004). Within the EU context a number of case studies have explored linking of different types of frames to issues, struggles for imposing particular frames, and the effects thereof on policy choices (Candel et al., 2014; Cerna & Chou, 2014; Daviter, 2001; Littoz-Monnet, 2012; Moschella, 2011; Princen, 2010; Rhinard, 2010).. But all of these studies focus on particular issues and their journeys throughout the agenda-setting stage of the policy process. While the issue definition literature is reconciled with the idea of issue competition, it has failed to theorise on a macro perspective to framing, in terms of an overall agenda. On the other hand, the policy typology literature has proposed the concept of issue character, developed on the basis of cross-sectional issue comparisons, to explain different modes of policy making via inherent structural differences between policies. This strain of thought is not directly associated with the concepts agenda setting and framing. But as Baumgartner and Jones (2005) note, with

their focus on the logic behind topics appearing in public debates scholars in this field in fact study agenda success. Such topic typologies have so far been applied to the public, the media, or interest groups' agendas (see e.g. M. A. Baum, 2002; Carmines & Stimson, 1980; Sigelman, Sigelman, & Walkosz, 1992), while the agendas of political institutions, which are subject to the same behavioural patterns (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005b), have generally stayed beyond the focus. This is also true for the EU, where research on organised interests is most advanced in this respect and features of policy issue context are seen to have effect on lobbying achievements (Klüver, 2011; Mahoney, 2007).

This study presents an attempt to bridge these two strains of literature by proposing to use the notion of issue character as an intervening element between the factors which potentially affect agenda setting and the structure of the overall agenda of political institutions. The focus of the chapter is on a single EU institution – the European Council. With its crucial role in determining the overall agenda of the EU (Eggermont, 2012; Nugent, 2010; Werts, 2008), understanding how the European Council distributes its attention and why it follows particular lines has implications for the broader EU agenda-setting processes. Recent research has demonstrated that core themes of governance seem to gain more attention than all other topics (Alexandrova, Carammia, & Timmermans, 2012). But we need additional research before we can assume that this is the only issue character typology that explains the allocation of attention.

The chapter proceeds as follows: after elaborating on the role of issue character as the a missing component in the theory of political attention allocation, and discussing the existing knowledge of agenda dynamics in the European Council, the structure of analysis is spelled out. The study assumes a two-step backward-moving approach. First, it uses longitudinal data on allocation of attention in the European Council to disentangle the dimensions of issue character which determine the levels of attention. Two dimensions are discovered, one of which corresponds well with existing research. The second issue character type is less important overall but shows a fluctuating pattern of saliency over the years. After interpreting its meaning, the second step of the analysis evaluates the extent to which various factors predict the rises and falls in

its saliency. The study concludes with a discussion of the implications of the empirical findings and the use of the new theoretical model.

## **From Attribute Intrusion to Issue Character**

The definition of an issue is one of the crucial determinants of the level of attention allocated to it (Baumgartner & Jones, 2005). Peters (1994; 2001) argues that the EU is a political system different from those of nation states in many respects as far as agenda setting is concerned. Notably, issue definition is even more important in the EU because it determines the way and level on which the issue will be tackled. In particular, '[t]he internal fragmentation, overlapping competencies and multiple logics of political representation of supranational actors regularly ensure that alternative issue definitions remain in play simultaneously' (Daviter, 2001). These peculiarities have made the EU's political system an attractive arena for scholars, who focus on the effects of unclear or changing jurisdictional boundaries and venue interactions on issue attention and problem formulation or framing (see e.g. Princen, 2010; Rhinard, 2010; Sheingate, 2000; Wendon, 1998).

The most common approach to the empirical study of framing consists of a focus on a single issue or larger topic, which is subject to different frames over time and exploration of how these frames have evolved and competed across venues. To take an EU example, Daviter's (2001) study the European Commission's biotechnology policy discovers three dominant frames. A struggle between an environmental and an economic frame results in subsequent success intervals for each of them, and is finally overturn by a third frame of consumer choice. These findings, while incredibly insightful for scholars interested in biotechnology policy, bare the usual pitfalls of case-study research – they are not generalizable to all issues on the political agenda. This shortcoming has long-ago been recognised by Theodore J. Lowi in his critical review of 'the problem of uniqueness' (1964: 311). Lowi (1964; 1972) advocated that in order to understand political conflict fully, we need to consider characteristics related to the type of issue. And these characteristics should be formulated in such a



way that they can apply to all points on the agenda. While his proposed solution, namely the use of a distinction between distributive, (constituent<sup>23</sup>) regulatory and redistributive policies has encountered critique and been subject to revisions (e.g. Kjellberg, 1977; Wilson, 1973; 1980), the notion that there are certain types of issue characteristics, which structure overall political debates and agendas, merits attention. Markedly, Lowi's approach does not speak of exclusive categories of policy types but rather hints at latent dimensions of policy<sup>24</sup> (Lowi, 1972).

The issue character concept can be a useful tool for expanding the framing literature towards studies of overall agenda dynamics rather than evolutionary monologues of single topics. In order to grasp its place in the agenda-setting process we should start with examining the standard logic of explaining the level of political attention on a single issue within a single policy venue. Figure 3.1 A presents this in a simplified model. Political attention is determined by factors associated with the participants in the policy process (e.g. party ideology, preferences, etc.) and the context (e.g. issue development indicators, institutional architecture, focusing events, etc.) Some of these factors are activated by the agenda setter(s) to produce problematization of an issue, i.e. to convert an issue into a policy problem. This process involves issue definition, or as Baumgartner and Jones (2005) conceptualise it, attribute intrusion<sup>25</sup>. An example of this agenda-setting model can be found in a study of the effect of economic conditions, public opinion (most important problem measure) with respect to the economy, and congressional ideology on attention to economic issues in US congressional hearings (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005b).

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<sup>23</sup> This category was added in Lowi's later work of 1972.

<sup>24</sup> The four categories are a matrix based on two dimensions: likelihood and applicability of coercion.

<sup>25</sup> Generally, this can be expected to go hand in hand with issue expansion, but such a prospect is rather uncommon to the EU (Princen, 2007).

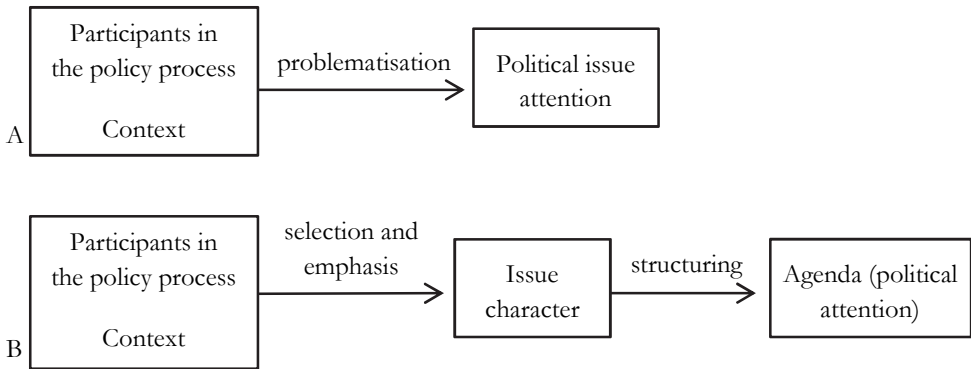


Figure 3.1. Agenda-setting models for a single issue (A) and a whole agenda (B)

However, when we move to the whole agenda both conceptually and methodologically it is impossible to use the factors to directly predict agenda composition. One solution would be to analyse all topics on the agenda separately and then induce general findings. But such an approach is inherently flawed foremost because it infringes on the core assumption in agenda-setting theory that attention is scarce and allocating more of it to one issue means depriving another one. Therefore we need an intermediary step in the model that represents a unifying (clustering) aspect for all policy areas. Such an option can be derived from the notion of issue character as a structuring inherent dimension of policies. Thus, in the agenda-setting model which corresponds to the whole agenda the distribution of attention will be explained by issue character the prominence of which is a function of factors related to the participants in the policy process and the context. Figure 3.1 B displays this model.

Issue character is a way of describing the underlying line of classification which divides and brings together matters on the agenda. The concept does not assume a static phenomenon; over time an issue can exhibit stronger or weaker degree of the same trait. In other words, the saliency of a particular issue character can vary over time and the extent to which one type of character is stressed has consequences for attention patterns. The prominence of a character type is determined by the desires and abilities of the participants in the agenda setting process, features of their

environment and interactions between the two. Thus, these two groups of elements do not determine issue character itself, they only influence the extent to which a certain type of character will be emphasised.

Besides Lowi's original conceptualisation of distributive vs. regulatory vs. redistributive policies, other classifications of issue character are possible. For example, Wilson (1980) speaks of costs and benefits and the extent to which each of them is concentrated or diffused as two structuring elements of politics. Yagade and Dozier (1990) distinguish among concrete and abstract issues, referring to the degree of difficulty to conceptualise a topic. An analysis of voting patterns by Carmines and Stimson's (1980) suggests another typology – easy versus hard issues. The first type comprises symbolic matters which are often related to political goals, whereas the second refers to technical aspects, requiring expertise and associated with policy means.

## **European Council Agenda Dynamics**

The European Council is an official EU institution since the Treaty of Lisbon but it has been conducting regular meetings ever since March 1975 and acting as the key top arena for political negotiation. It has been responsible for setting the direction of European integration via defining the general political guidelines for the Community, which more than once resulted in initiation of new common policies (Werts, 2008). Due to its impenetrable discussions, consensus decision-making method, and until recently informal status, studying agenda setting in the European Council has been difficult, and seemingly worthy only for scholars of law and institutional structure. Research on framing and information processing dynamics in the EU also tends to overlook the role of the European Council, although the importance of informal decision making is nowadays stressed (for an overview see Daviter, 2001; 2014).

Yet, this body has affected the development of the European integration process more than any other Community institution (Eggermont, 2012; Wessels, 2008a). Over the years it has become the agenda setter of the EU, discussing every issue within and

beyond the EU's competence framework (de Schoutheete & Wallace, 2002; Werts, 2008). The expectation that the European Council's role will continue to become bigger (van Grinsven & Melissen, 2002) has already begun to materialise. An example thereof is the vital decisions the institution took in its attempts to counteract the recent financial crisis and mitigate the consequences of it.

Few recent studies reveal that the catalogue of themes discussed by this top EU body is extremely diverse, covering both issues within and outside EU jurisdictions (Alexandrova et al., 2014; Nugent, 2010; Wessels, 2008a; Wessels, 2008b). And yet, some issues appear to be overrepresented. The domains of foreign affairs, governance and macroeconomics are not just the group occupying the highest proportion of attention but they are said to be able to condition attention to other issues (Alexandrova et al., 2012). The common feature of these policy fields is that they all constitute core themes of governance. Thus, the continuum of core vs. non-core matters to the functioning of a polity appears to be a driving line behind attention allocation. The finding is in line with research on executive agendas in five different European countries and the USA (Jennings et al., 2011). This suggests that particular types of agendas might be prone to similar character structures, giving additional leverage to the importance of empirically exploring issue character.

But is the suggested core–non-core themes dimension the only latent character explaining the allocation of attention in the European Council? If it were so, some critical moments in agenda setting dynamics would be hard to explain. For example, why did the launching of the Social Agenda (more widely known as the Lisbon Agenda) gain so much attention at the European Council meetings in the year 2000? The employment and social policy matters contained in it cannot be classified as core themes, and did not appear to rise up to such a status during that time. The same can be said for the discussions of climate change (with a special reference to the EU position on international climate finance) in the second half of 2009. Therefore, more systematic analysis of the nature of issue character behind the agenda of the European Council and the factors that influence character salience is needed. The following analysis makes a step in this direction.

## **Data, Approach, and Methods**

The starting point of the backward-moving analysis is the agenda of the European Council, derived from the Conclusions circulated after the end of almost each meeting.<sup>26</sup> This empirical material is utilised to disentangle issue character as a determinant of attention allocation in the European Council. The second step in the study explores changes in the salience of the discovered lines of issue character over time. Lastly, this information is used as a dependent variable in the final stage. Data on characteristics of the participants in the policy process and the context is employed to explain variation in saliency.

The dataset of European Council Conclusions consists of 126 documents covering the period 1975–2012. The texts are coded at the quasi-sentence level following the EU codebook of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP), which categorises issues in policy themes irrespective of tone and direction. The policy topics are classified in 19 general fields: agriculture, business and internal trade, civil rights, defence, education, employment, energy, environment, foreign affairs, foreign trade, governance, health, immigration, law and crime, macroeconomics, regional policy, science and technology, social policy, and transport.<sup>27</sup> The total number of quasi-sentences amounts to 43587, excluding statements without policy content.

The method applied to derive issue character dimensions is metric multidimensional scaling (MDS), since this technique aims to produce a spatial map of the ‘hidden structure’ of a dataset on the basis of which the nature of the derived dimensions can be interpreted (Kruskal & Wish, 1978). For this purpose the documents are combined into 74 equal periods of six months, corresponding to the Presidency chairmanships.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Conclusions are not always published following an informal meeting.

<sup>27</sup> The original coding scheme includes two more categories. Since the total attention to each of them represents less than 1 per cent of the agenda, they have been merged with other topics. Culture (0.5 per cent of the total attention) was combined with education, and public lands and water management (0.1 per cent) was merged with environment.

<sup>28</sup> The total number of Presidencies in this 37-year timeframe is 76 but two of them did not produce any Conclusions. While the rotating Presidency system was changed for the European

MDS uses proximities (i.e. differences or similarities) between objects to identify their position on the map. Since the attention of political actors is always scarce (Jones, 2001), emphasising one issue will inevitably result in deemphasising another one. This implies inseparability of the dimensions, wherefore the Euclidean MDS measure is used (Steyvers, 2002). The computation of the similarity matrix used to extract the MDS solution will be based on the proportions of attention to each of the 19 policy themes per six-month term in the 74 identified Presidency periods.<sup>29</sup> The choice of the MDS method is motivated by the fact that the technique allows to infer dimensions without having pre-defined attributes of these dimensions.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, its application appears suitable for data comprising relative emphasis on policy issues (see Veen, 2011).<sup>31</sup>

After performing MDS on the full dataset and identifying the nature of the extracted lines of issue character, temporal MDS is carried out. This allows us to evaluate changes in saliency of the latent dimensions. Building on the work of Van der Brug

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Council in December 2009, the same time slots are used for the remaining three years in order to make the periods comparable to the rest. Presidency half-annual planning appears to be the most appropriate temporal structuring element consisting of equal intervals.

<sup>29</sup> Count data instead of proportions could also be used. However due to the changing length of the Conclusions over time, shares are considered a more appropriate point of departure.

<sup>30</sup> The formula for Euclidean distances between shares of attention to policy themes is:

$$D(t, t') = \sqrt{\sum_{p=1}^n |t_p - t'_p|^2}$$

where  $D$  is the distance between the agenda at time  $t$  and the agenda at  $t'$ ,  $t_p$  is the proportion of attention allocated to policy topic  $p$  at time  $t$ ,  $t'_p$  is the proportion attention allocated to policy topic  $p$  at time  $t'$ , and  $n$  is the number of variables (74 half-annual agendas).

<sup>31</sup> Note that classical MDS based on Euclidean distances yields the same results as Principal Component Analysis (Cox & Cox, 2001: 43-44). Factor analysis would not be appropriate to use here, since in it the matrix for the calculation of factors consists of correlation or covariance estimates between attributes, whereas the matrix used in the MDS approach is based on dissimilarity in attributes (i.e. the differences between attention fractions at  $t_0, t_1, t_2 \dots t_n$ ).

(1999) and Baumgartner and colleagues (2008) temporal developments are evaluated with the help of subsequent overlapping time windows. Each time window consists of three consecutive half-annual terms. An example of two periods where substantial changes in dimensionality are detected will be analysed qualitatively in order to explore the logic behind the change modes and confirm the utility of the dimension labelling.

The last stage attempts to explain the rises and falls of a second latent dimension. Data on the ideological composition of the European Council and indicators theoretically related to the nature of the discovered issue character line are used as predictors of the saliency fluctuations. A tobit regression is computed due to the limited nature of the dependent variable and short time frame.

## **Analysis of Issue Character**

A first step in the analysis is to determine the number of character lines 'hidden' in the data. The MDS solution produces 18 dimensions<sup>32</sup>, with the first two having much higher eigenvalues. The squared eigenvalue accounts for 97.91 per cent of the total dissimilarity. These results suggest that it might be sufficient to consider a two-dimensional space, and an inspection of the scree plot of eigenvalues encourages this. Kruskal's Stress 1 test shows that the total stress of the two-dimensional solution is 0.15<sup>33</sup>, which is acceptable although somewhat low. A move to a three-dimensional structure will only reduce the stress to 0.13 (i.e. within the same acceptability range) and lift up the cumulative per cent explained by the squared eigenvalue to 99.03. Therefore, the choice for a two-dimensional framework seems reasonable. In order to confirm that the dimensionality structure is not due to one or a few outliers, validation

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<sup>32</sup> The maximum number of dimensions equals  $n-1$ , where  $n$  is the smaller of the number of rows and columns.

<sup>33</sup> A stress of 0 denotes perfect match between the data structure and the represented dimensions, whereas a stress of 1 would indicate no match at all.

of the results displayed in the map is crucial.<sup>34</sup> A split-sample check was performed on two samples of data including the agendas of every second and every third Presidency respectively. Both new maps (not shown) are very similar to the original one, thus validating the results of the MDS structure on the full data.

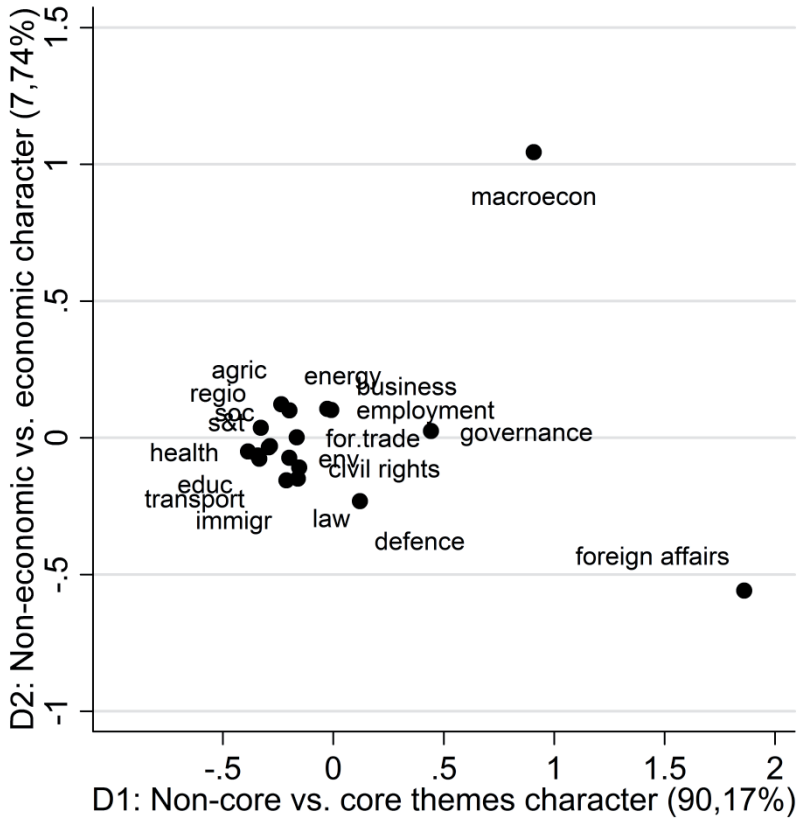


Figure 3.2. Classical metric MDS on European Council Conclusions, 1975-2012

<sup>34</sup> There are two main approaches to validation – regression of the ‘attributes’ on the dimensional coordinates or a split-sample check. The second approach involves conducting an MDS on one or more samples of the attributes and comparing the samples to the original model. It is considered a better validity check (Jaworska & Chupetlovska-Anastasova, 2009).



The first dimension (D1) explains 90.17 per cent of the dissimilarity in attention to topics on the European Council agenda (squared eigenvalues), and is thus the main type of issue character that determines the level of attention across issues. As figure 3.2 shows, this dimension corresponds well to the findings of previous research (Alexandrova et al., 2012; see also Jennings et al., 2011). The key determinant of the allocation of attention in the European Council is the classification of topics as core vs. non-core functions of government. Core themes – foreign affairs, macroeconomics and governance – occupy the positive extreme of the spatial map. Defence appears as an intermediary category on the continuum, suggesting that it can rise to a core function status but does not always do so. This seems logical considering the less crucial location of this domain as a government function within the EU competency framework compared to its member states. The non-core functions end of the dimension contains the rest of the issue categories. The distances between topics there are small, considerably smaller than these between the core themes, suggesting that changing the focus from one topic to another here is quite easy.

The second dimension (D2) explains 7.74 per cent of the attention dissimilarity in the Conclusions (squared eigenvalues). Reading the dimension from top to bottom, the line starts with macroeconomics, and moves to a mix of expenditure and regulatory domains at some distance, then continues with interior policies – civil rights, law and crime, and immigration – and ends with defence and foreign affairs at the other extreme. This dimension seems to reflect the presence or lack of an economic character of the discussed issue. It follows Nugent's (2010: 281-282) crude classification of EU policies in two groups: economic and non-economic ones. This is a simplified version of the typology of EU policies proposed by Hix and Høyland (2011) consisting of five categories: expenditure (distributive and redistributive), macroeconomic, regulatory, interior, and foreign policies. The close positioning on the MDS map of many topics of expenditure, regulatory and interior policy types suggests that the crude generalisation of issues within a policy area might conceal blurring of policy types. For example, while in the EU agriculture would be foremost considered an expenditure policy, it also contains many regulatory aspects. Or the topic of foreign trade (the Community's commercial policy) includes the common customs tariff but

also features political aspects such as measures towards a fair international trade system. An exploration of the longitudinal developments of this dimension can shed better light on the plausibility of the interpretation.

## **Temporal Changes in Dimensionality**

The next step in the analysis is to conduct MDS on subsequent overlapping time windows of three terms in order to explore how the salience of issue character has evolved over time. Figure 3.3 displays the share of dissimilarity in attention explained by the first two dimensions.<sup>35</sup> The temporal MDS analysis shows that the distinction between core and non-core themes has permanently been the most dominant type of issue character determining the allocation of attention. The second dimension underpinned by the economic character of issues has also continuously played a role even if mostly a minor one. In a few periods though it has demonstrated rises in importance, accounting for over 10 or 15 per cent of the dissimilarity in attention. The highest peaks were in the first half of 1985 and second half of 1988, where economic character explained 28 and 45 per cent of the attention dissimilarity. Thus, it seems that more often than not economic character has played a role in the motivation to distribute attention across issues in the European Council. While most of the time its role has been negligible, in a few cases it has enjoyed stronger saliency, reducing the explanatory power of core themes as a characteristic driving attention size. Before delving further into the reasons behind these shifts in the prominence of D2, let us explore the placement of issues on it in two periods of high fraction of explained dissimilarity – the first halves of 1985 and 2001.

During the period January-June 1985 (Presidency 21) the European Council held 2 meetings. The temporal dimensionality plot measuring the dissimilarity between this six-month term and its subsequent and preceding ones, shows that the salience of D2 increased to 28.31 per cent. Figure 3.4 A shows the placement of issues on the

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<sup>35</sup> The sum of the two does not equal 100 percent whenever additional dimensions account for the total explained variance.

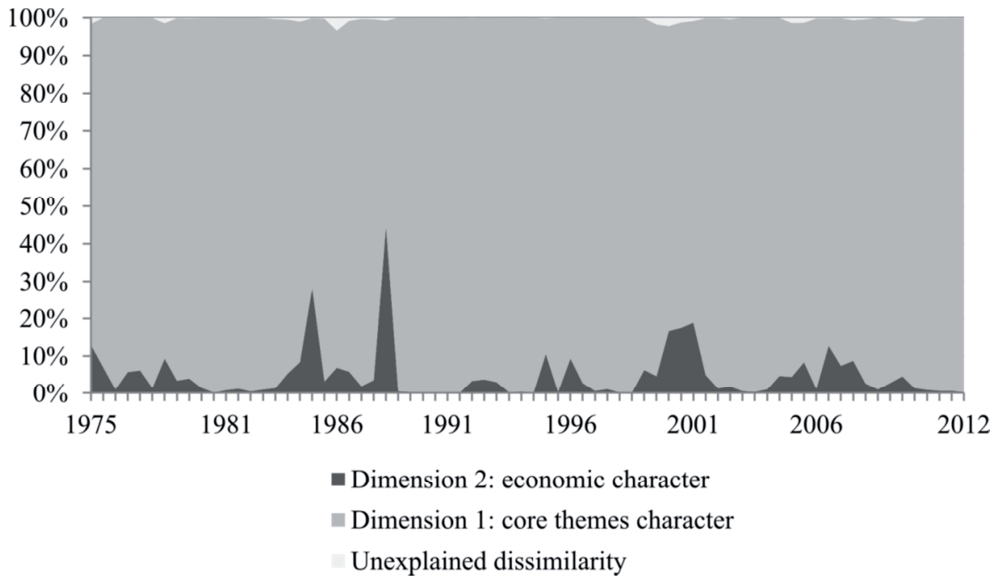


Figure 3.3. Temporal changes in prominence of issue character of the European Council agenda

economic character line. Several topics, in particular governance, business and science and technology demonstrate a more pronounced economic character. A closer look at the specific issues discussed in the Conclusions confirms this logic. Two major aspects of governmental affairs were the reports by the ad hoc Committees on People's Europe and Institutional Affairs. Both of them had a strong focus on completing the Internal Market. This was the central topic within the category business as well. The theme science and technology featured a commitment to increasing the Community resources for research and development and also showed a link to the Common Market. Thus, the prominence of the Single Market issue and linking of other topics to it reflected an emphasis on the economic character of the agenda. Notably, the economic dimension was accentuated in reference to matters of both core and non-core themes.

Figure 3.4 B presents D2 for the time window around the 53<sup>rd</sup> Presidency, covering the first half of 2001. It explains 18.92 per cent of the dissimilarity in attention, with

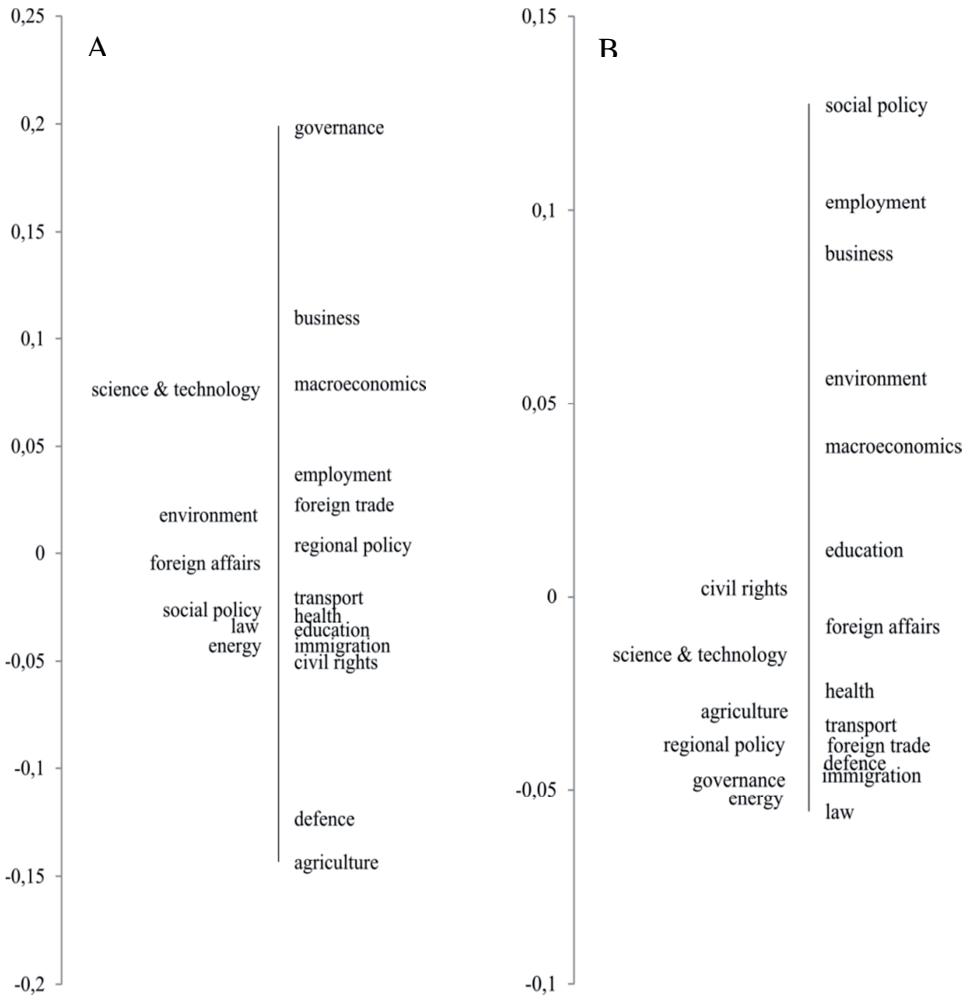


Figure 3.4. Economic issue character (D2) on temporal windows for presidencies 21 (A) and 53 (B)

rising elements of economic character in the areas of social policy, employment, business and environment. Exploring the nature of the issues discussed at the two meetings, a special focus on modernising the European Social Model is visible. This framework included adaptation of social protection systems in the context of ageing populations, promotion of social inclusion, modernisation of labour markets,

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improvements in employment mobility, etc. The need to meet employment targets was also stressed. The acceleration of economic reform was envisaged first of all via exploiting the potential of the Internal Market. Besides that, the EU Sustainable Development Strategy set a focus on coordinating economic, social and employment policies. In short, various topics became more prominent because they were presented in economic light – drawing on economic targets and goals, leaning to use of macroeconomic instruments, and linking performance in other sectors to the economic policy.

Thus, the overall dimensionality structure of the European Council agenda constitutes a rather fixed space of two lines of issue character, the saliency of which however varies over time. While core issues always receive more attention, adding a stronger economic connotation to topics can also lead to higher attention. The key question is under what conditions the second dimension can rise in prominence. The next section proposes an answer to this question.

## **Explaining Salience of Economic Issue Character**

In order to understand what drives the changing mode of salience in economic character, we need information about the European Council and its context, associated with economic matters. First relevant factor could be the ideological composition of the body, measured in terms of overall left-right preferences. While exiting research shows that most of the issues discussed by the European Council cut across the traditional party line, party politicization in this institution is possible (Tallberg & Johansson, 2008). It seems logical to expect ideology to have an effect exactly on the economic character of the agenda, with a stronger emphasis of this dimension during stronger left-wing orientation periods. In order to measure the left-right position of the European Council at a given moment, a variable is constructed on the basis of the data in the Comparative Manifesto Project classifying the position of political parties on this continuum (Volkens et al., 2011). Using information from the ParlGov database on the composition of national governments in every EU

member state (Döring & Manow, 2012), the left-right standing of each individual government can be determined. The mean value of all member states is recorded as a general score for the right-left position of the European Council, available up to the first half of 2006.<sup>36</sup> The overall expectation for ideology is the following:

*H1. The more left-wing the European Council, the more salient the economic character of its agenda.*

Other factors with potential influence on the saliency of economic character of the agenda can be derived from indicators for the state of the economy. In particular, it would be relevant to consider GDP growth, level of government deficit, unemployment and consumer confidence in the economy. While the first measure is a standard way of estimating how well or bad the economy is doing overall, government deficit and unemployment have been relevant keywords in EU jargon over the course of the integration project viewed with a sense of urgency. Adding consumer confidence includes a citizens' estimation of how well the economy is performing. Data on GDP growth of the EU is available via the OECD and for the other three indicators via Eurostat. Unfortunately, the some estimates (government deficit and consumer confidence) are available after 1995 only. Due to the annual availability of two indicators (government deficit and GDP growth), the yearly scores are assigned corresponding to each of the two half annual terms. The general expectation for all indicators is based on a problem – solution logic, with the European Council emphasising agenda items in economic terms whenever exacerbation of economic problems take place and avoiding to do so in times of economic advance. In particular, this suggests the following hypotheses:

*H2. Rising GDP growth results in less salient economic character of the agenda.*

*H3. Rising government deficit leads to more salient economic character of the agenda.*

*H4. Rising unemployment brings about more salient economic character of the agenda.*

*H5. Rising consumer confidence results in less salient economic character of the agenda.*

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<sup>36</sup> Due to missing data on some of the new member states and Greece since July 2004, the average calculation includes less than all countries.

Last but not least, we need to control for changes in the institutional leeway in addressing issues, which can be measured via the total number of meetings per semester. The final dataset covers 23 semesters in the period 1995 – mid-2006. Before estimating the regression equation a number of data checks are performed, confirming normality and homoskedasticity of the residuals<sup>37</sup>, stationarity of the data, lack of autocorrelation of the errors<sup>38</sup>, and no multicollinearity across the independent variables. Therefore, an analysis via an OLS regression would have been justified. However, our dependent variable is bound between the theoretical values of 0 and 100 (minimum and maximum explained variance in MDS), which might yield inconsistent OLS regression estimates. A solution for this problem is to use tobit, a censored regression where the upper and lower limits of the dependent variable can be pre-set.<sup>39</sup> Table 3.1 presents the results.<sup>40</sup>

Two of the predictors – ideology and government deficit – have significant effects on the economic character of the agenda in the expected directions. For a one unit move towards the right side of the left-right ideological dimension of the European Council, the economic character of the agenda becomes less prominent with 1.51 per cent. One unit increase in the government deficit (measured in net lending/borrowing as a per cent of GDP) of the EU is associated with 2.29 units growth in the predicted value of economic character. GDP growth, unemployment and consumer confidence do not have a statistically significant effect, and neither does the frequency of summit meetings.

Despite some inefficiencies in the data, especially the short time frame, the fact that a significant relationship with some predictors is found is remarkable. Overall it seems that political ideology matters in the European Council when it comes to politicising

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<sup>37</sup> Breusch-Pagan / Cook-Weisberg test for heteroskedasticity is used.

<sup>38</sup> No serial correlation was detected applying the Durbin-Watson statistic, as well as the Durbin's alternative and the Breusch-Godfrey tests.

<sup>39</sup> Fractional logit is another possibility but due to the low numbers of observations vis-à-vis dependent variables, tobit is preferred.

<sup>40</sup> Applying the *linktest* and *ovtest* commands in Stata, the model appears to be correctly specified and without omitted variables.

issues in terms of economic character. One specific indicator also has an effect, but a range of others do not. Notably, government deficit, which has become a keyword in EU political rhetoric in the last few years, has had an agenda-structuring effect already since at least the mid-1990s. The different patterns in the dependent variable until the early 1990s and ever since suggest that we should be careful with generalisations over the full time period. The early years of the European Council when its agenda-setting role was less noticeable and the Community did not have so large competences might be subject to different explanations.

	Tobit
Right-Left	-1.505*** (.363)
GDP Growth	1.048 (2.150)
Government Deficit	2.286** (.946)
Unemployment	3.680 (2.848)
Consumer Confidence	-.173 (.540)
Nr. meetings	-1.683 (1.394)
Constant	-19.311 (25.951)
Observations	23
R <sup>2</sup>	.502
Prob>F	.000
Log-Likelihood	-64.746

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

Table 3.1. Explaining variation in the economic character of the European Council agenda, 1995-2006



## **Conclusion**

The central claim of this chapter is that it is possible to unravel the factors determining the overall composition of political agendas if we rely on the notion of issue character as an intermediary step. The empirical value of this claim was presented on the basis of an analysis of political attention in the European Council, a crucial informal player in the EU with strong agenda-setting powers. The approach consists of two steps. It starts by examining the longitudinal spread of attention to policy topics across equal time periods via a dimensionality reduction technique with the aim of extracting the types of issue character that structure the level of attention. In the second phase temporal changes in the saliency of issue character are used as a dependent variable vis-à-vis a number of theoretically relevant predictors associated with the participants in the policy process and their context. Finally, the model consists of endogenous and exogenous factors which influence the saliency of issue character over time, which in turn determines the overall level of attention allocation to various topics on the agenda.

Analysing the content-coded Conclusions of the European Council, two issue character lines appear to structure the attention: core – non-core themes and economic – non-economic ones. The first dimension corresponds with findings of previous research and is in line with the primary role expectation for the institution – to draw the political framework for development of the EU. The second dimension is the real discovery, since although being mostly low-key sometimes it rises in saliency at the expense of its stronger counterpart. Thus, problematizing certain issues in economic terms has led to more attention to these matters, even when they were non-core themes. The emphasis of economic elements in various issues is a reflection of the rising prominence of an economic issue character dimension of the agenda. The changing saliency in economic issue character can be explained by factors related to the participants in the agenda-setting process and their context. For the European Council, the political ideology of the body was used as a relevant example of the first, and a range of economic indicators as instances of the second. The results show a positive effect of left-wing positioning in the European Council and rising government deficit on economic character saliency and suggest that other economic

indications, such as GDP growth, unemployment level, or consumer confidence might not play a role.

The empirical application of the two-step agenda-setting model demonstrates well the utility of using this approach in order to understand the logic behind overall agenda composition. But foremost it reveals vital new information about the functioning of the European Council and its motives in discussing policy matters. We know now that the EU top does not only dedicate substantial attention to the issues core to the functioning of the Community and its institutions, and their survival. Non-core themes can be defined as problems on another dimension – emphasizing elements of economic character – and in this way gain prominence. The two brief case descriptions demonstrated how this happened for social policy, employment, environment, and other matters in two different periods. The necessary conditions for such issue character emphasis are found in pro-leftist orientation of the European Council and increasing government spending resulting in deficit.

Our knowledge of how to bridge issue attention determinants with the broad composition of political agendas has moved a step ahead. Using the notion of issue character as a bridging component appears a theoretically viable and empirically justifiable tool. Future research should expand the study of the functioning of the two-step agenda-setting model towards other EU institutions in order to see whether the same dimensions play a role there and to what extent. This can enable more fined-grained analyses of institutional interactions and informal distribution of tasks across EU levels. The approach should also be applied to non-EU venues, as this can give insights into the cross-polity similarities in agendas and information processing.

# 4. National Interest versus the Common Good: The Presidency in European Council Agenda Setting<sup>41</sup>

Co-authored with Arco Timmermans

## Abstract

The European Council is an institution which brings together the Heads of State, or Governments of the EU Member States. For the Presidency, preparing the agenda of European Council meetings involves a tension between loyalties. Existing research is divided over the question whether the Presidency pushes its domestic policy agenda on the EU level. Using empirical data on the Conclusions of European Council meetings, and national executive speeches presented annually in five Member States, this article investigates the relationship between the policy agendas of the EU and its constituent countries. It tests whether national issue attention of the Presidency holder dominates the European Council agenda. The findings suggest that having the Presidency does not provide a de facto institutional advantage for agenda-setting power for any of the countries in the sample. The analysis points out that normative and political constraints limit the leeway of presiding Member States to push for domestic agenda preferences in the European Council.

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<sup>41</sup> Reprinted from Alexandrova, P., & Timmermans, A. (2013). National Interest versus the Common Good: The Presidency in European Council Agenda Setting. *European Journal of Political Research*, 52(3), 316-338. doi:10.1111/j.1475-6765.2012.02074.x

## **The European Council Presidency and Agenda Setting**

When in December 2009 the Treaty of Lisbon entered into force, a ‘permanent’ President of the European Council was appointed for a renewable term of 2.5 years. This institutional change was seen as the removal of the opportunity to hoist the ‘national flag’ in the European Council (Wessels & Traguth, 2010). Until the Treaty of Lisbon, the Presidency of the EU rotated every half year between Member States. This office entailed a set of tasks, responsibilities and costs that each Member State took upon itself when its turn had come. The symbolic meaning of chairing the European integration process for half a year was mixed with hopes and expectations for exercising influence and leaving a mark on the agenda. Some even saw abuse of the institutional privilege of the Presidency for domestic interests. This article analyses the extent to which the Presidency actually entailed such advantage in agenda setting.

A key venue of attention and agenda setting during the term of a Presidency is the European Council. Until the Treaty of Lisbon, the Council was an unofficial institution where EU leaders met, but it had, and still has, remarkable powers. The Council became operative in 1975 as an intergovernmental body composed of the Heads of State or Government of the Member States of the EU.<sup>42</sup> It does not have a formally fixed term of office, and its composition changes constantly as executives in the Member States change. As the highest body of political decision making in the EU, the European Council is expected to express the common interest and unity among its members on a broad range of topics. It also takes the lead in designing the institutional architecture of the EU. The number of meetings during each six-month Presidency initially fluctuated between one and two, but since the late 1990s, having three or four meetings (some of them usually informal) also became common.

The use of the institutional position of the EU Presidency received some scholarly attention, but only rarely with a focus on the European Council as opposed to the Council of Ministers. This is surprising given the central role of the former in EU agenda setting and influence in other Union institutions (Princen & Rhinard, 2006;

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<sup>42</sup> European Community at that time.

Werts, 2008). Much of the existing work analyses single Presidencies held for six months and considers success or failure in terms of leadership, ambition, skills of negotiation and brokerage, as well as the ability to implement the initial programme.<sup>43</sup> These evaluations sometimes focus on particular issues pushed up or down the agenda during a Presidency term. For example, in a study of the Portuguese Presidency in the second half of 2007, Ferreira-Pereira (2008: 69) observes that ‘the Portuguese government succeeded in uploading certain specificities of national foreign policy to the European level’. Accounts of single Presidencies, however, may not be representative of the level of national influence whenever the institutional privileges associated with the Presidency are used. As Schout and Vanhoonacker (2006: 1073) note, assessments of single terms often are ‘strongly influenced by the heat of the moment’.

Beyond such evaluations, there are a few general studies analysing Presidencies across countries.<sup>44</sup> Research on the three Scandinavian Member States suggests that the Presidency functions mostly as an amplifier of national interests (Bengtsson, Elgström, & Tallberg, 2004). Likewise, in a study on Presidencies held by seven countries in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Elgström and Tallberg (2003: 193) conclude that ‘the core property of Presidency priorities [is that] they constitute national interests’. These observations suggest that Member States holding the Presidency, first of all, use this position of institutional privilege to influence the EU agenda. However, other studies emphasise the limits of Presidency agenda-setting power. Behavioural norms of neutrality, consensus-building and effectiveness are considered to be constraints on the possibilities for agenda influence (Niemann & Mak, 2010). Similar effects are ascribed to unfavourable domestic political conditions (Bunse, 2009; Kirchner, 1992; Quaglia & Moxon-Browne, 2006) or to factors related to the nature of the European Council – in particular the inheritance of items from

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<sup>43</sup> See, e.g., Peter Ludlow’s Briefing Notes, Presidency evaluations in the *Journal of Common Market Studies Annual Reviews*, occasional papers of the Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (SIEPS) and some others cited in this article.

<sup>44</sup> Several cross-country comparative analyses of Presidency power exist with respect to a single policy field – that of environment (Warntjen, 2007; Wurzel, 1996; 2004).

previous meetings and the attention given to focusing events (Bunse, 2009; Hayes-Renshaw & Wallace, 2006a; Princen & Rhinard, 2006; Thomson, 2008; Voss & Bailleul, 2002; Warntjen, 2008a; 2008b).

The existing literature thus presents conflicting views on the agenda-setting power of the Presidency. This article empirically juxtaposes the two rival claims on the use of this institutional venue for agenda setting by the presiding country. Using data on policy agendas of the European Council and the governments of five Member States, we analyse whether holding the Presidency makes a difference for a Member State's influence over the European agenda. The analysis comprises the entire period of existence of the European Council. The article proceeds as follows. First, we discuss the institutional properties of the European Council and its Presidency. Second, we depict two rival hypotheses for Presidency effect. After describing our methods and data, we present a survey of existing case studies on Council Presidencies and relate the findings to our data. Next, we conduct fractional logit regressions in order to answer our main research question, and analyse the results. Finally, we discuss implications of our findings and indicate ways for further research.

## **Institutional Properties of the European Council and its Presidency**

The European Council came into existence in 1975 after some twenty years of irregular summitry (von Donat, 1987). The office of the Presidency<sup>45</sup> dates further back in time. It is one of the oldest structural elements in the Community, first referred to in the 1957 Treaty of Rome, which stipulates that the 'office of President shall be held for a term of six months by each member of the Council in turn'. As Werts (1992) argues, the establishment of the European Council created a new function – the President-in-Office of the European Council – a crucial role, which entailed a position of spokesman for the Member States and chief person in charge of

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<sup>45</sup> As Westlake and Galloway (2004) note, the Presidency is neither a body nor a formal institution and the best way to refer to it is as an office or a function.

the meetings organised by this new body. Thus, with the introduction of regular meetings of the Heads of State and Government, in 1975, the status of the EU Presidency was elevated further (von Donat, 1987) and acquired more responsibilities (Kirchner, 1992). The European Council meetings became ‘the president’s show’ (Hayes-Renshaw & Wallace, 2006a: 178). With growing enlargement, it became increasingly difficult to take the positions of all leaders into account and countries had to wait longer for their turn in office. This led to worries about the Presidency becoming overburdened, or even inert, and prompted the Heads of State and Government to seek a better solution for chairing meetings. With the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, a ‘permanent’ President was introduced for the European Council, while the rotating Presidency system was maintained for meetings of the Council of Ministers.

The European Council is considered the informal agenda setter of the EU (Werts, 1992; 2008) and an institution at the ‘heart of EU decision making’ with respect to the ‘overall parameters of the EU system’ (Nugent, 2010: 162-163). Although the European Commission has a monopoly over legislative initiatives, the impulse for legislative proposals often comes from the European Council. At their meetings, the Heads of State and Government are free to discuss any issue they consider relevant (Hayes-Renshaw & Wallace, 2006a; Nugent, 2010; Werts, 2008). The functions of the European Council may lead us to expect a bias towards foreign policy, EU institutional architecture and economic development, but in reality a broad range of topics within (and beyond) Community decision making is addressed (Alexandrova et al., 2012; Werts, 2008). The ‘European Council Conclusions’<sup>46</sup> are the instruments through which the institution exercises its agenda-setting power (Hayes-Renshaw & Wallace, 2006a). These documents contain the issues that have been discussed by the Heads of State and Government and the agreements that have been reached. The EU leaders often directly delegate a task to the institutions and even Member States: they ask the Commission to investigate a problem or make proposals, urge the Council to

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<sup>46</sup> Until the Treaty of Lisbon, these documents were formally called ‘Presidency Conclusions’. The terms ‘European Council Conclusions’, ‘Presidency Conclusions’ and ‘the Conclusions’ are used interchangeably in this article.

speed up decision making, establish a new committee to draw a report on a hot topic (e.g., the Committee of Wise Men), encourage Member States to coordinate their policies in a particular field and so on. However, the European Council also acts as a final arbiter on complex questions and solely takes decisions on key appointments and changes in the institutional infrastructure of the Community. Therefore, the Conclusions represent an agenda at midpoint of the policy process – receiving input signals from other institutions, but also producing output decisions (Alexandrova et al., 2012). In short, the Conclusions have both a direct and an indirect impact on the agenda of the EU at different stages of the policy process.

The ways in which the Presidency can leave its mark on the Council are diverse as the office includes multiple functions. Existing research on the EU Presidency points to four categories of functions: administrative, leadership, coordinating and representative (Elgström, 2003b; Kirchner, 1992; Niemann & Mak, 2010; Quaglia & Moxon-Browne, 2006; Tallberg, 2006). They are all relevant for the European Council Presidency (Werts, 1992; 2008). In practice, they involve the preparation of meetings and the discussion agenda, as well as technical organisation of the summits (administrative role), chairing the meetings and ensuring consensus in decision making (leadership and moderation roles), cooperation with the Union institutions – in particular the European Commission and the European Parliament – and representation of the EU position in relation to third countries, international organisations and the media (coordinating and representative roles).

In agenda setting, the Presidency can use various mechanisms to promote topics that are of major domestic importance. First, it can propose political initiatives, press for the inclusion of discussion points and structure the agenda. The drafting and finalisation of European Council Conclusions play a key role here. For example, Sweden – a promoter of environmental issues – managed to achieve an agreement on an EU strategy for sustainable development at the Göteborg European Council in June 2001, which received broad attention in the Conclusions (Bjurulf, 2003). Second, during meetings, the Presidency can moderate the discussions and allocate time for addressing different topics. This may even involve pushing a topic away from the agenda against expectations of other countries. Such negative agenda setting then



leads to minimal attention to the topic in the Conclusions. For example, in its focus on a single core priority – enlargement – the Danish Presidency of 2002 managed to ‘put on the backburner’ a pressing and recurring issue: the Convention on the Future of Europe (Bengtsson et al., 2004; Friis, 2003). Third, since the 1990s it is common for the Presidency to organise informal and special (thematic) European Council meetings besides the general ones.<sup>47</sup> These special summits are held in order to address specific topics, as was the case with the Birmingham European Council of 1992, which adopted a declaration on ‘community close to its citizens’ and the November meeting of the Luxembourg European Council in 1997, which produced an agreement on employment. While informal meetings usually do not produce Conclusions, they are convened in order to create a comfortable atmosphere for building consensus in formal summits that follow.

## **Two Rival Expectations about Presidency Agenda Setting**

While the office of the Presidency provides opportunities for leaving a national mark on the European Council agenda, the literature disagrees over the de facto utilisation of this institutional advantage. One expectation about the actual agenda-setting power of the Presidency is the exploitation of the office for the pursuit of national goals. Tallberg (2008b) suggests that agenda management is one of the core powers of the Presidency. This includes possibilities for influencing the agenda via introduction of new issues, placing emphasis on particular issues and excluding issues from the agenda (Tallberg, 2003a). Such agenda management possibilities may lead Member States in charge of the office to promote and push national interests (Sherrington, 2000; van Grinsven, 2003). Some empirical evidence exists in support of this view (Elgström & Tallberg, 2003). A number of case studies present examples of countries that managed to upload national interests and shift attention to domestically preferred topics on the EU agenda (Garel-Jones, 1993; Manners, 2003; Morata & Fernández, 2003). Particular utilisation of the office even made some scholars suggest that expression of national

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<sup>47</sup> Not to be confused with the extraordinary meetings, which are follow-ups of focus events.

interests is among the tasks of each Presidency (Schout & Vanhoonacker, 2005). Although this notion is generally contested (Bulmer & Wessels, 1987; Kietz, 2007), it suggests there is no clear division between the political position of the Member State and the institutional logic of appropriateness for holding the Presidency. Often, attempts are made to present initiatives and preferred policies as European – that is, as benefiting the whole Community. Wessels (2008a) notes that the Presidency always provides political impulses by linking domestic interests to EU plans and projects. This increases the chances of getting a proposal accepted and allows for integrating national priorities. For an issue to be discussed in the EU arena it needs to be framed as an EU problem in need of EU action, and not just national consideration (Princen, 2009). Yet a ‘truly European’ policy image may be a cover for what is actually a national interest.<sup>48</sup> While the Presidency may be tempted to influence agendas on various levels in the EU, the politically elevated position of the European Council means that its agenda would be the primary target. As an intergovernmental institution, the European Council typically is an arena associated with the national interests of Member States (Tallberg & Johansson, 2008). The informal nature of the Conclusions, and their important implications for EU policy making, add to this choice of venue for promoting topics of national importance when a Member State controls the Presidency.

A rival expectation about the effective agenda-setting power of the Presidency is that common matters prevail over topics derived from the national political agenda. This expectation is based on the neutrality norm, codified in the Presidency Handbook of the Council Secretariat (General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union, 1997), and the assumptions that the Presidency should strive for consensus building and effectiveness in joint action (Elgström, 2003b; Niemann & Mak, 2010). These norms are meant to help avoid national interests from becoming dominant during a Presidency term, even though no formal sanctions are applied in case of violation. A

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<sup>48</sup> This strategy not only occurs in connection to the Presidency. Member States more generally try to sell domestically favoured solutions as ‘in the best interest of the EU’. However, the literature on Presidency agenda-setting power underlines that the office provides an institutional advantage for achieving domestically determined goals.

Presidency may observe the norms in order to present itself as a reliable partner, committed to the goals of European integration (see e.g. Verhoeff & Niemann, 2011). It also may trade off issues of lesser importance and consider it in its national interest to smooth the process of agreement within the European Council (Bunse, 2009; Niemann & Mak, 2010). Such process goals differ from pursuing substantive policy interests upon which other Member States may disagree. Finally, the neutrality norm also appears by default when a presiding country simply is unable to construct the agenda in its preferred way as other Member States do not support the priority list or openly disagree with it. For this reason, Presidency norm compliance sometimes may be seen as contingent on the Member State's 'individual will' and the 'ability to violate' (Niemann & Mak, 2010: 733-734).

Besides norms, two other sets of factors may constrain the Presidency and its use of the institutional advantage. One is related to domestic political conditions, the other to the nature of the European Council as an institution in the EU policy process. Elections and subsequent problems in forming coalition governments, or unstable cabinets, hinder strategies of national interest. If national actors, such as coalition parties, fail to agree over a common agenda, or even fail to build a viable government to begin with, the 'national interest' in agenda setting and prioritising matters for immediate consideration acquires little meaning (Bunse, 2009; Kirchner, 1992). Referenda on EU issues or Eurosceptic public opinion may have similar distorting effects on setting clear targets of national interest. Furthermore, it is argued that at European Council meetings items often are inherited from previous summits (Thomson, 2008; Warntjen, 2008a) and drafts of the Conclusions are prepared at lower levels beforehand, making the European Council a rubber-stamping device (Hayes-Renshaw & Wallace, 2006a). In addition, focus events such as international conflicts, disasters and major political or economic shocks limit the agenda space for the Presidency to address those issues listed according to its preference (Bunse, 2009; Hayes-Renshaw & Wallace, 2006a; Princen & Rhinard, 2006; Princen, 2009; Voss & Bailleul, 2002). Time and attention of EU leaders is always scarce. Thus, domestic political constraints on agenda-setting capacity, policy legacy and the need to respond

to events are said to limit the freedom of manoeuvre and the strategic opportunity for a Member State holding the Presidency.<sup>49</sup>

In short, there are two distinct expectations on how EU Member States perform when in charge of the Presidency of the European Council. Whether the position of institutional advantage is exploited for pursuing topics of national importance, or is used for consensus building and the common good as Presidency norms prescribe also depends on other conditions relating to domestic decision capacity and the agenda space of the European Council in the broader EU policy process. The Presidency is potentially a powerful position in EU agenda setting, but expectations about the actual exercise of this power need more confrontation with systematic empirical data. We turn to this task in the next sections.

## **Analysing Agenda Impact**

If the Presidency is used to follow topics of national importance in European Council agenda setting, we may expect that the Member State holding the office tries to dictate what issues get attention within its six-month term. We prefer to speak of ‘topics of national importance on the domestic agenda’ rather than use the rather ambiguous term ‘national interest’. How is it to be determined whether this type of agenda effect actually happens? Analysis of Presidency programmes may reveal some of the national priorities, but these are only the input to European Council meetings. Moreover, the programmes have changed over time and since 2003 they officially come in form of multi-annual strategic plans and annual operational programmes, involving more than one country in the agenda schedules. A more systematic approach to measure

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<sup>49</sup> Countries may also make strategic use of these conditions. An unanticipated focus event could open a window of opportunity, and even domestic political trouble sometimes may be tackled more effectively when the national political leadership has an institutional possibility for venue access in the EU. In general, however, they are considered constraints on the possibility of pushing national interests.

Presidency influence on the European Council agenda requires analysis of the national policy agenda relative to the immediate output of European Council meetings.

Topics of major national importance emerge when domestic preferences are aggregated and presented in the view of the political leadership of the country. Useful indicators of this kind of national expression are the executive policy agendas that are produced annually. These agendas often are presented in speech form to the broader public, and this underlines government commitment to their content beyond the symbolic, and sometimes ceremonial, aims of the event of presentation. Executive speeches are, for the most part, containers of substantive policy and legislative intentions (Breeman et al., 2009; Jennings et al., 2011; John & Jennings, 2010). The European Council agenda is formalised in the Presidency Conclusions. Recent research shows that these Conclusions are an agenda containing both input elements, and items further in the policy process, towards producing output decisions (Alexandrova et al., 2012). This research shows also that attention shifts on the agenda occur with a magnitude similar to executive policy programmes in nation-states. While there are differences between the institutions, the agendas they produce are indicators of attention to policy topics at both national and European level that allow comparison.

We use a dataset of European Council Conclusions covering the entire period since this institution became operative in 1975. A Presidency semester contains between one and three Conclusions, which we aggregate per half-year term. To estimate national agenda effects, we analyse national executive speeches presented immediately before a Presidency term (see Appendix 4.1).<sup>50</sup> We take a sample of five EU Member States for which systematic data on annual executive policy agendas are available. The five countries are: Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom. These countries represent variation in size and length of EU membership, and each has taken the Presidency of the Council several times. We exclude two Presidency

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<sup>50</sup> Differences in the length of the periods between the holding of a speech and the beginning of a Presidency exist across all, and within some, of the countries due to the different time points at which the speeches are held.

terms in the analysed period: Denmark in 1987, which produced no written Conclusions; and Spain in 2010, when the permanent President of the European Council was already active as the Lisbon Treaty took force the year before. The analysis covers a total of 25 Presidency terms over the period 1976–2008.

All documents are content coded at quasi-sentence level by different national teams using country and EU versions of the codebook developed in the Comparative Agendas Project, which contains some twenty major policy topic categories and over 200 subtopics.<sup>51</sup> In this analysis we use only the major topics. Some adjustments of categories were made.<sup>52</sup> The final coding scheme includes 22 policy fields (see Appendix 4.2). The length of national executive speeches varies, as does the volume of text in the Conclusions. Therefore, we analyse attention to policy topics as shares of the whole agenda, and not in terms of absolute numbers of statements. While the minimum attention given to a single topic is 0 per cent, the maximum varies between 27 and 66 per cent (see Table 4.1). The mean topic attention on each agenda is 4.54 per cent and the standard deviation ranges between 4.3 and 8.3 per cent. Jurisdictional boundaries do not affect the types of agendas we are studying. The European Council often discusses issues beyond the decision-making powers of the EU institutions, and national executives also experience no constraints in this respect. While there is variation in the attention to topics across the agendas, the functional similarity between the executive speeches and the Conclusions is manifested further in general attention scores. The two most prominent themes on the European Council and all

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<sup>51</sup> See, e.g., the British codebook at: [www.policyagendas.org.uk](http://www.policyagendas.org.uk).

<sup>52</sup> Most significantly, the topic ‘immigration’ was created (initially not present as a major topic in all country codebooks) out of the subcategories ‘migrant workers’ and ‘immigration and refugees issues/rights’. Also, in order to be able to account for domestic views on the European integration process, and make this comparable to EU-level discussions of the same issues, a new topic – ‘European institutional design’ – was created, which corresponds to EU issues in the country data and a few subtopics in the European Council data – namely enlargement, EU institutions, treaties and relations between the EU and its Member States.

the national executive agendas, except Spain,<sup>53</sup> are foreign policy and macroeconomics. Topics such as agriculture, energy, science and technology, and culture rarely attract much attention from national leaders in the policy agendas they compose annually, in their home countries and at the summits. Each of these topics constitutes less than 2 per cent of the total policy agenda.

	Agenda EU	Agenda DK	Agenda ES	Agenda FR	Agenda NL	Agenda UK
Mean	.045	.045	.045	.045	.045	.045
Standard deviation	.071	.055	.065	.080	.043	.049
Minimum	0	0	0	0	0	0
Maximum	.470	.315	.325	.659	.273	.246

Table 4.1. Summary descriptive statistics

We test whether the attention to major topics on the agenda of a Member State can predict the attention given to these topics on the European agenda. This does not mean that we expect specific issues belonging to main policy fields to be exactly the same on both agendas, but if a topic is important at home, a country in pursuit of such national topic during its Presidency term may be expected to advocate broad attention to it on the European Council agenda. For example, if Denmark stresses environmental issues domestically and seeks to influence the European Council agenda in line with this national priority, this behaviour may be visible in more attention to the environment in the Conclusions. If no such effect occurs, this indicates absence of national topic driven influence on the European Council agenda. It must be appreciated that absence of effects of domestic topic pursuit may point to failing attempts to exploit institutional privilege, but such attempts are not given. As we mentioned above, the behavioural repertoire of the Presidency also includes

<sup>53</sup> The two topics which obtained most attention on the Spanish agenda are governance issues and macroeconomics. This difference might be partially explained by the fact that the number of Spanish speeches included in the analysis is smaller.

adherence to norms and rules as they emerged with the office. Member States taking the Presidency may refrain from pursuing domestic topics and interests and decide to act otherwise in agenda setting.

Our analysis proceeds in two steps. First, we conduct a survey of all available case studies on the 25 Presidencies held by the five countries in our sample. The case study selection is only based on studies discussing the use of the Presidency office for domestically important policy themes. Then we calculate simple Pearson correlations between the European Council agenda and the executive agenda of the Presidency holders. We match the main results of the case studies with the correlations in order to see how much the findings from individual case studies correspond to the correlations derived from our data. This first step is used for data validation. Then we proceed to the actual test for Presidency effect and conduct fractional logit regressions. Our dependent variable is the share of attention spent on a single topic on the agenda of the European Council. Since the agenda consists of 22 topics and the total attention for each time period is 100 per cent, the share of attention to a given topic can range between 0 (no attention to this topic) and 1 (all attention given to it). It is very unlikely that the agenda ever contains just one topic, but it may not always contain all topics at the same time. Some may not get any agenda space at different points in time. We use a fractional logit regression model, as proposed by Papke and Wooldridge (1996). This technique is developed specifically for dependent variables which represent proportions: range from 0 to 1 and can take many observations at the two extremes.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Considering the bounded nature of our dependent variable, OLS regression cannot be used here. Beta regression is also not applicable as in it the dependent variable assumes values between 0 and 1, yet excluding 0 and 1. One alternative would be to do a truncated regression, which would allow us to systematically exclude observations below or above a certain threshold. However, this requires a normally distributed dependent variable – a condition which is not met by our data.



## Testing for Institutional Advantage in Agenda Setting

Table 4.2 shows the Pearson correlations between the European Council agenda and the executive agenda of the country in charge of the Presidency. It also shows summarised findings from existing research addressing the actual level of pursuit of nationally important policy topics in the EU. Comparing the correlation scores with the results of these case studies, we can see high correspondence, validating our data. The survey of case studies shows that Presidencies with a reputed strong national imprint on the European agenda are the ones for which we find high agenda correlation levels. The reverse also appears true: lower correlations match with case study findings of Presidencies that did not, or could not, push for domestic preferences.<sup>55</sup> Besides pointing out the relevance of our data for the comparative quantitative analysis we intend to undertake, these findings suggest some variation in the extent to which the two types of agendas are related during Presidency terms, and more often display low correlations. While sometimes a Presidency holder succeeds in advocating a domestic agenda in the European policy arena, this success is quite limited and occurs infrequently.

Presidency	MS	Literature	Source	Corr.
July-Dec. 1986	UK	Committed to efficiency and ‘tempered by cautious realism’	Wallace (1986)	.120
Jan.-June 1989	ES	Leading goal of the Presidency – to present itself as a reliable and efficient partner, committed to Community interests	Morata and Fernández (2003)	.114
July-Dec. 1992	UK	Presidency accused of drift and pursuing of national agenda at the expense of Community goals	Garel-Jones (1993)	.605**
July-Dec. 1995	ES	Attempting to profile Spain as a big European power and push for domestic interests	Morata and Fernández (2003)	.241
Jan.-June 1997	NL	Modest approach: no attempts to realise national priorities, acting rather as facilitator and honest broker	van Keulen & Rood (2003)	.336

<sup>55</sup> The only exception among the twelve cases is the second Spanish Presidency of 1995.

Jan.-June 1998	UK	Strong attempt for agenda-shaping: quite some level of achievement of domestic priorities, higher than during the previous British Presidency of 1992	Manners (2003)	.743**
July-Dec. 2000	FR	Absence of priorities and ambitious agenda: a Presidency overshadowed by one goal – signing the Treaty of Nice; some interest in defence issues	Costa, Couvidat and Daloz (2003); Lequesne (2001)	.087
Jan.-June 2002	ES	Strategic player approach: trying to push for national interests within the limits of the institutionally designated role of a Presidency-holder; not managing to present its interests in a way that would seem acceptable for agreement among all leaders	Morata and Fernández (2003)	.305
July-Dec. 2002	DK	Double-sided goal: to convince the domestic public of the merits of European integration and the European partners in the European commitment of Denmark; successful in achieving major priorities (especially enlargement), while leaving other issues to lag behind	Bengtsson, Elgström and Tallberg (2004)	.434*
July-Dec. 2004	NL	More stress on 'process management' than national priorities as a mean to increase Dutch standing internationally and 'feed' Europeanisation at home	van Keulen & Pijpers (2004)	.463*
July-Dec. 2005	UK	Not much leeway for initiative: a Presidency under the stamp of the negative referenda on the EU Constitution, expected to bring back on track the integration process	Oppermann (2006)	.144
July-Dec. 2008	FR	A 'hectic agenda' oriented towards occurring crises rather than consistent pre-determined priorities	Dehousse and Menon (2009)	.295

Notes: \* Significant at the .05 level (2-tailed); \*\* significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

Table 4.2. Case study survey of national agenda effect of the Presidency and Pearson correlations of the European Council agenda and the national executive agenda of the presiding country

We now turn to the fractional logit models for each of the five countries in our sample. Our independent variables are the proportions of attention to topics on each of the national executive agendas. We have created dummy variables to distinguish for each of the semesters in the analysed period, whether a country was presiding or not. By looking at the interaction effects between a national agenda and a Presidency dummy, we can see whether holding the Presidency makes a difference in influencing the European Council agenda. We report coefficients and marginal effects with robust standard errors and significance levels in Table 4.3.

Model 1 shows that the national agendas of each of the five countries can significantly predict some share of the attention on the European Council agenda (at the 0.01 level). When an interaction of the national agenda with the Presidency dummy is considered, significance drops far beyond any accepted level for all of the five countries, suggesting that there is no interaction. This means that overall, holding the Presidency does not make a difference in the influencing of the agenda of the European Council. The relatively low deviance of the logits suggests good model fit. Model 2 includes one additional variable – the count number of the Presidency – in order to control for the possible effect of changes in the European Council agenda over time. The variable is not significant in any of the five regressions, which indicates that the agenda did not change in a systematic way during in the analysed period.

The coefficients of a fractional logit regression are hard to interpret directly; it is more meaningful to consider marginal effects. The marginal effect of the predictor variable is the derivative of the conditional probability of predicting the dependent variable. In our case, the marginal effects show how much change in the proportion of attention on the European Council agenda will be caused by a unit (i.e., 1 percentage point) attention change on any of the national agendas,<sup>56</sup> measured at the average predicted mean for the European Council agenda. For example, the marginal effect of 1 unit increase of the share of attention to a single topic on the Danish executive agenda,

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<sup>56</sup> They also show how much change on the European Council agenda has been caused by the national agenda in interaction with the Presidency dummy. Yet, these effects are not significant.

leads to a 0.33 percentage point increase in the share of attention to a given topic on the European Council agenda at its predicted mean of 4 per cent average topic attention. Similarly, a 1 percentage point attention share increase on the Spanish agenda produces a 0.23 percentage point rise in attention on the EU level at a predicted European Council attention mean of 4.3 per cent. For France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, a 1 percentage point increase of attention on their national agendas will lead to 0.20, 0.44 and 0.42 percentage point attention increases in the European Council at predicted average means of 4.1, 4.0 and 3.7 per cent, respectively.<sup>57</sup>

While the separate models cannot be directly compared since they include different independent variables, considering the similar results of the predicted average mean for the EU agenda does allow us to draw conclusions. The findings suggest that some variation exists between the five countries in the extent to which the national executive agendas of each of these countries are related to the European Council agenda. A higher level of agenda-setting impact is observed for the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, Denmark shows medium values, whereas Spain and France have the lowest impact. These cross-country differences, however, are small and thus should not be over-interpreted.

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<sup>57</sup> We have also conducted the analysis on a slightly modified dataset, where we divided the attention to one of the most prominent topics – foreign affairs – into four subcategories: foreign aid and human rights; international terrorism; international economic development; and other foreign policy and international affairs issues. This increased the N of our sample and allowed for a more fine-grained distinction of the themes within a contestably wide policy theme. The overall results of the fractional logits are the same: we find no support for the Presidency impact thesis and significant individual impact of each of the national agendas on the European one. Small differences exist in the size of the marginal effects. Conducting the analysis in this modified form confirms the robustness of our findings.

	Coefficients	RSE	P-value	Marginal effects	RSE	P-value
AgendaDK	8.619	(.853)	.000	.330	(.035)	.000
PrDK	-.090	(.207)	.664	-.003	(.008)	.655
AgendaDK*PrDK	1.045	(1.781)	.558	.040	(.068)	.558
Constant	-3.567	(.089)	.000			
Deviance		35.236				
Pseudo-LL		-75.809				
N		550				
AgendaES	5.365	(1.057)	.000	.221	(.045)	.000
PrES	.140	(.252)	.578	.006	(.011)	.593
AgendaES*PrES	-2.237	(1.767)	.206	-.092	(.074)	.212
Constant	-3.352	(.108)	.000			
Deviance		23.701				
Pseudo-LL		-50.447				
N		352				
AgendaFR	4.796	(.741)	.000	.188	(.030)	.000
PrFR	-.167	(.188)	.375	-.006	(.007)	.355
AgendaFR*PrFR	2.772	(1.718)	.107	.109	(.067)	.105
Constant	-3.363	(.081)	.000			
Deviance		36.831				
Pseudo-LL		-76.607				
N		550				
AgendaNL	11.435	(1.102)	.000	.437	(.046)	.000
PrNL	-.045	(.198)	.818	-.002	(.007)	.816
AgendaNL*PrNL	.558	(2.283)	.807	.021	(.087)	.807
Constant	-3.698	(.095)	.000			
Deviance		35.759				
Pseudo-LL		-76.071				
N		550				

AgendaUK	12.918	(.959)	.000	.460	(.036)	.000
PrUK	.122	(.199)	.540	.004	(.008)	.553
AgendaUK*PrUK	-1.759	(1.954)	.368	-.063	(.070)	.369
Constant	-3.857	(.095)	.000			
Deviance		30.246				
Pseudo-LL		-73.314				
N		550				

Notes: The table includes 5 separate models for each of the 5 countries.

RSE = Robust standard errors, given in parentheses.

Table 4.3. Fractional logit: predicting the European Council agenda by the national executive agendas and testing for Presidency effect

## Reconsidering the Image of the Presidency

Our findings do not provide clear evidence for the expectation that the office of the Presidency of the European Council has induced incumbent Member States to pursue topics of national prominence in agenda setting in the EU. For the five countries included in this analysis, we did not find systematic increases in attention to topics on the European Council agenda, if such topics had gained prominence on the domestic executive agenda of the country taking the Presidency. If there is an effect on European Council agenda setting by Member States, this does not appear to depend on taking the Presidency position. But generally, such effects are also relatively limited. The analysis, covering more than thirty years, shows that Member States try and do influence the European Council agenda, but the observed pattern mostly contradicts the idea that the institutional advantage of the Presidency provides a special access point for such influence. In European Council agenda setting, until the Lisbon Treaty, the Presidency has hardly signified a *primus inter pares* position in the case where the Member State, in charge of this office, intended to elevate topics of national importance to high priority on the European Council agenda.

This result suggests that the alternative expectation about the institutional position of the Presidency is closer to the reality of European Council agenda setting. This rival expectation includes an emphasis on common problems, not on matters that have high priority on the national executive agenda. The Presidency is thus not capable, or simply has no intention, of leaving a strong national mark on the European Council agenda. The potential for influencing the agenda is attuned by the norms of neutrality, effectiveness and consensus building, enshrined in this office as well as by external constraints on agenda control. These constraints can be inherited topics waiting to be attended to, focus events that create a sense of urgency around issues not scheduled for broad consideration, domestic political instability, or stalemate hindering national priority setting and creating agenda ambiguity. Some of these factors may work as a constraint relative to other Member States raising matters for attention at the European Council agenda, from a position outside the spotlight of the Presidency. To what extent each of these factors is an obstacle, and under what conditions one is more important than another, remains to be studied. We found support for the claim that the institutional design of the European Council Presidency has not granted effective agenda-setting powers to single Member States during the semester term of this office. Instead, this office provides collective benefits to all Member States.

## **Conclusion**

Since the launch of the office in 1975, the Presidency of the European Council has attracted the attention of academics and practitioners. The multiplicity of functions connected to it has opened possibilities for Member States, beginning a Presidency semester, to leave a mark on the office. Through the agenda-setting powers vested in this office, the Presidency may introduce new issues on the agenda, remove others or attribute salience. Some studies of specific Presidency terms contain empirical indication of the use of the office for the promotion of domestic interests and topics on the European agenda. Other work points to rather limited possibilities for national agenda influence on the Council when the country is the incumbent of the Presidency. Normative and political constraints are seen to limit such agenda-setting opportunity.

In this article, we analysed 25 Presidency semesters of five different EU Member States throughout the period 1976–2008 in order to confront the different expectations with systematic empirical data. While for each country there is some effect from the national executive agenda on the first of the next following agenda of the European Council, the Presidency office does not appear to make a difference. The alleged institutional advantage of the Presidency in agenda setting has more diffused benefits which are not concentrated in the hands of the Member State in charge of this office. Political conditions and institutional norms further diffuse these agenda benefits. This may be good news for the balance of powers across Member States in setting the agenda of the EU, which is delicate and always sensitive to political disruption. It also means, however, that national influence on the European Council agenda is less structured by institutional design, and more by actual political power relationships between Member States. The European Council displays its intergovernmental nature. Our findings in this analysis also indicate that the introduction of a permanent President of the European Council has not removed a venue previously exploited for directing the European policy agenda towards domestic goals. In this sense, then, the agenda effects of the Presidency must be seen more in terms of balancing a diversity of national interests and topics raised by the Member States.

This contribution focused on the recurring expectation in the literature that national priorities drive the formation of the European Council agenda when Member States are in charge of the Presidency. We must be cautious with empirical generalisation, but the variation in the sample of five Member States, and the long time frame of our analysis, provides good reasons to conclude that the institutional advantage hypothesis is not well grounded empirically. Our findings suggest some ways for further research on agenda setting in the European Council. Empirical work may be done to analyse how behavioural rules lead Member States taking the Presidency to perform the roles of balancing and diffusing benefits of attention to problems. What topics are sensitive to agenda inheritance, how do new issues intrude on the agenda, and what is the role of focus events that may propel issues that were not anticipated? Thus, the role of the Presidency may be investigated by considering both programmed problem attention



and topics that were not foreseen within the time horizon of national leaders gathered in the European Council. Which issues are stickier on the agenda than others? Further empirical work also may link the study of agenda setting in the European Council and the actual leadership and negotiation powers manifest in the meetings held by this institution. How do informal meetings play a part; what is the composition of the agenda of such meetings compared to the formal Conclusions that are published? Finally, if national priorities to problems in the country with the Presidency are not imposed on the European Council agenda, is this maybe because policy agendas are converging between EU Member States? These types of analyses may help us to better understand how the EU, as a multi-layered political system, addresses major policy problems and to see how responsive it really is in the face of so much critique of democratic deficit. It also may help us understand how the Presidency is, above all, an office for performing balancing acts among a diversity of Member States.

## Appendixes

*Appendix 4.1. Timing of executive speeches and Presidencies*

Presidency	Denmark	France	The Netherlands	Spain	United Kingdom
July-Dec. 1976	7-10-1975	31-12-1975	16-9-1975		19-11-1975
Jan.-June 1977	5-10-1976	31-12-1976	21-9-1976		24-11-1976
Jan.-June 1978	4-10-1977	31-12-1977	20-9-1977		3-11-1977
Jan.-June 1979	3-10-1978	31-12-1978	19-9-1978		1-11-1978
Jan.-June 1981	7-10-1980	31-12-1980	16-9-1980		20-11-1980
July-Dec. 1981	7-10-1980	31-12-1980	16-9-1980		20-11-1980
July-Dec. 1982	6-10-1981	31-12-1981	15-9-1981		4-11-1981
Jan.-June 1984	4-10-1983	31-12-1983	20-9-1983		22-6-1983
Jan.-June 1986	1-10-1985	31-12-1985	17-9-1985		6-11-1985
July-Dec. 1986	1-10-1985	31-12-1985	17-9-1985	15-10-1985	6-11-1985
Jan.-June 1989	4-10-1988	31-12-1988	20-9-1988	24-2-1988	22-11-1988
July-Dec. 1989	4-10-1988	31-12-1988	20-9-1988	24-2-1988	22-11-1988
July-Dec. 1991	2-10-1990	31-12-1990	18-9-1990	4-12-1989	7-11-1990
July-Dec. 1992	1-10-1991	31-12-1991	17-9-1991	20-3-1991	31-10-1991
Jan.-June 1993	6-10-1992	31-12-1992	15-9-1992	24-3-1992	6-5-1992
Jan.-June 1995	4-10-1994	31-12-1994	20-9-1994	19-4-1994	16-11-1994
July-Dec. 1995	4-10-1994	31-12-1994	20-9-1994	19-4-1994	16-11-1994
Jan.-June 1997	1-10-1996	31-12-1996	17-9-1996	3-5-1996	23-10-1996
Jan.-June 1998	7-10-1997	31-12-1997	16-9-1997	11-6-1997	14-5-1997
July-Dec. 2000	5-10-1999	31-12-1999	21-9-1999	22-6-1999	17-11-1999
Jan.-June 2002	2-10-2001	31-12-2001	18-9-2001	26-6-2001	20-6-2001
July-Dec. 2002	2-10-2001	31-12-2001	18-9-2001	26-6-2001	20-6-2001
July-Dec. 2004	7-10-2003	31-12-2003	16-9-2003	30-6-2003	26-11-2003
July-Dec. 2005	5-10-2004	31-12-2004	21-9-2004	15-4-2004	23-11-2004
July-Dec. 2008	2-10-2007	31-12-2007	18-9-2007	4-7-2007	6-11-2007

Note: Countries holding the Presidency indicated in light grey boxes. Executive agenda of Spain considered only after the country became a member of the EU (i.e. no speeches in the dark grey boxes).

*Appendix 4.2. Matched policy agendas codes*

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Macroeconomics  
Civil Rights and Civil Liberties  
Health  
Agriculture  
Employment  
Education  
Environment  
Energy  
Immigration  
Transportation  
Law and Crime  
Social Welfare  
Regional Policy and Housing Issues  
Banking, Finance and Domestic Commerce  
Defence  
Space, Technology and Communications  
Foreign Trade  
Foreign Affairs  
Government Operations  
Public Lands and Water Management  
Culture  
European institutional design

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# 5. Political Responsiveness in Multi-Level Systems: The case of the European Union

Co-authored with Anne Rasmussen

## Abstract

Political responsiveness in multi-level systems is complex due to difficulties in transmitting information between voters and politicians but has received sparse attention. We conduct the first study of rhetorical responsiveness in the EU by relating the public's prioritization of policy issues to the European Council's agenda. Our analyses show aggregate evidence of political responsiveness despite frequent criticism of the EU's democratic deficit. However, after applying Granger causality testing in a cross-sectional framework, this effect appears on only four out of ten examined issues in the 2003–2012 period. The results illustrate the value of combining pooled and individual-level analyses of policy areas in studies of political responsiveness and lay the ground for further theorizing about the conditional nature of political responsiveness between issue areas in the EU and other contexts.

## Introduction

One of the central concerns in democracy is whether government policy is responsive to citizen preferences (see e.g. Dahl, 1956). Electoral competition encourages politicians to enact policies in line with public opinion to secure re-election and prevent civil disobedience and protests (see e.g. R. D. Arnold, 1990; Downs, 1957; Fiorina, 1973; Geer, 1996; Mayhew, 1974; Sen, 1970). An extensive literature has developed on this topic (for reviews see Burstein, 2003; Manza & Cook, 2002; Soroka

& Wlezien, 2004; 2005; Weakliem, 2003). It predominantly focuses on the US even if recent years have witnessed an increase in research on political responsiveness of selected advanced, industrialized countries and a few comparative analyses (see e.g. Bevan & Jennings, 2014; Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008; Soroka & Wlezien, 2010). Studies have grown in sophistication and focused on *when* and *how* public opinion affects public attention and policy, e.g. by considering how different political institutions influence responsiveness by affecting the degree of political contestation (Bevan & Jennings, 2013; 2014; Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008; Jones & Baumgartner, 2004; Jones, Larsen-Price, & Wilkerson, 2009; Soroka & Wlezien, 2010; Wlezien & Soroka, 2011; 2012).

One of the institutional factors investigated is the distinction between federal versus unitary states. One view argues that federalism may increase political responsiveness by providing opportunity for executives to “attend to issues outside their core functional policy responsibilities” (Bevan & Jennings, 2013: 13). Another emphasizes how the complexities in transmitting information between voters and politicians in a multi-level system may affect political responsiveness negatively. The vertical division of competences makes it harder for the public to acquire accurate information regarding what decision makers are doing (Soroka & Wlezien, 2010; Wlezien & Soroka, 2011). Such lack of civic awareness of policy outputs is likely to affect the ability of politicians to respond to public desires negatively.

The latter description of the complexities of political responsiveness in a multi-level context could not be a more accurate portrayal of the quasi-federal system of the European Union (EU). The EU is widely accused of suffering from a democratic deficit or a lack of linkage between what the public wants and what the system delivers (see e.g. Føllesdal & Hix, 2006; Jolly, 2007). At the same time, existing research has actually found a link between public preferences on European integration and overall volume of EU outputs up until the middle of the 1990s (Toshkov, 2011). The reason may be that these findings are based on analysis conducted at the *aggregate* rather the *policy area* level. In fact, the results of a recent paper linking public preferences for EU action and volume of legislative outputs in specific issue areas look less encouraging

(C. Arnold, Franklin, & Wlezien, 2013). While a pooled effect exists, it breaks down almost completely when policy fields are examined individually.

However, politicians do not only address public concerns by producing concrete acts, but also by giving attention to these concerns. Taking a policy agendas approach, we examine *rhetorical* rather than *effective responsiveness* (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008). Through a process referred to as ‘dynamic agenda representation’ (Bevan & Jennings, 2013; 2014), the public’s issue priorities may be translated into policy priorities (see e.g. Chaqués-Bonafont & Palau, 2011; Jones & Baumgartner, 2004; Jones et al., 2009; Lindeboom, 2012). More specifically, our study examines whether there is a link between how highly the public and the European Council prioritize certain policies. Such a focus on rhetorical responsiveness is crucial in order to understand political responsiveness in the EU and other multi-level contexts, where the decision makers at the central level have limited competences to issue legislation in many areas.

We match half yearly Eurobarometer data on the public’s prioritization of policy topics to detailed coding of the attention drawn to these themes in European Council Conclusions over the last ten years. Hence, rather than analysing the time series for each policy area separately, we perform time series cross-sectional regressions followed by a vector autoregressive Granger analysis (Hood, Kidd, & Morris, 2008). The last allows us to test the assumption of causal homogeneity across cross sections and to conduct tests of the *direction* of the relationship between opinion and attention. Our analysis covers ten issue areas over the period 2003–2012.

The distinctiveness of this contribution stems from conducting the first study of rhetorical analysis in the EU and presenting a design at the policy area level which scrutinizes the direction of relationship between opinion and attention. Moreover, we discuss the implications of our results for future theory building on differences in the political responsiveness across policy areas.

## Political Responsiveness

Since the 1970s, a body of “political responsiveness literature” on the relationship between public opinion and policy has emerged (for reviews see Burstein, 2003; Manza & Cook, 2002; Soroka & Wlezien, 2004; 2005; Weakliem, 2003). This literature has found evidence of links between what the public wants and public budgets, policy agendas, and policy outputs (Jennings & John, 2009; Jones et al., 2009; Page & Shapiro, 1983; Soroka & Wlezien, 2005; Stimson, MacKuen, & Erikson, 1995; Wlezien, 1995; 2004).

Recently, a couple of studies on EU political responsiveness have been conducted, which deliver a somewhat mixed message on the extent to which the decision makers respond to public demands in this system. Toshkov (2011) shows that there is a relationship between public support for European integration and important EU policy output, but points out that the relationship breaks down in the middle of the 1990s. Using vector autoregression methodology and Granger causality tests he demonstrates that it is public opinion that triggers legislative output and not the other way around. Arnold, Franklin, and Wlezien (2013) examine the effect of public opinion on counts of a broader range of EU legislative acts than directives<sup>58</sup> and weigh the different acts by the number of lines they contain. No matter whether they look at the public preferences towards EU integration or EU membership, they do not find a significant relationship between public opinion and EU policy outputs on the aggregate level or in specific issue areas. Instead, they discover a link between questions on whether common EU action in specific areas is desirable and their weighed measure for legislative activity in a stacked regression of 14 policy areas. However, in analyses of the five areas containing a sufficient number of cases to estimate individual models the relationships breaks down in all but one area.

At first outset, this is not exactly good news from the perspective of democratic legitimacy. Yet, even if producing policy output is no doubt an important part of

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<sup>58</sup> Strictly speaking, Toshkov (2011) looks at “non-Commission directives” but these are commonly referred to as simply “directives”.



*effective responsiveness*, using volume of legislative activity is also a somewhat crude measure. Requiring that the volume of *everyday legislative outputs* coming from the EU in a given policy area should be linked to the overall preferences of the public for using *common action* in this area for the EU to be politically responsible may be demanding. By focusing on directives in this aggregate analysis of EU level responsiveness, Toshkov (2011) gets closer to a measure of “important legislation”. This makes his assumption that each new piece of legislation contributes to integration more convincing even if his measure still cannot capture all aspects of responsiveness. At the same time, it neglects *rhetorical responsiveness* (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008), i.e. how politicians address public concerns by giving attention to and discussing these concerns rather than producing concrete acts.

Rhetorical responsiveness can be expected to be particularly important in a multi-level system where politicians need to share competences with other decision-making levels and often do not have jurisdictions to address the public’s worries by producing actual legislation. EU politicians can for example not issue laws in areas of exclusive Member State competence just as decision makers at the US federal level need to respect that certain issues are within state jurisdiction. Such divisions of competence will not necessarily restrain them from responding to public views but they will have to do so *rhetorically*: i.e. by discussing issues which the people care about. These discussions are not just “cheap talk” but set out political directions and serve as crucial instruments of policy planning. They can lead to legislative responses at both the central and lower decision-making levels. Research on the US shows how agenda-setting activities are linked to responsiveness by signalling priorities, which are translated into effective responses at later stages of the policy process (Jones et al., 2009). Moreover, political discussions and prioritization in multi-level systems can have other far-reaching consequences, most notably related to the redrawing of jurisdictional boundaries.

Therefore, our approach to studying political responsiveness differs from the most dominant one in the literature, which focuses on the relationship between the *positions* of the public and decision makers on various issues. We analyse dynamic agenda representation (Bevan & Jennings, 2014) , or the transmission of the *priorities* of the citizens to the priorities of the political elite. Placing an issue on the agenda can be

seen as the first stage of representation and necessary step before hard laws can be made. Responding rhetorically constitutes a political signal to the citizens that their demands are taken seriously and likely to be dealt with, possibly in the form of political action.

## **The Case of the European Union**

In many ways, the EU can be seen as a *hard* case for detecting political responsiveness even within the broader category of multi-level systems. Discontent with the European project has been prominent, including examples of failing referendums where EU questions were put to a vote, strong support for anti-EU parties, and declining turnout in the European Parliament elections. No matter whether the judgment comes from academics, policy practitioners or citizens, a large share of them agree that the EU constitutes a system where the decisions taken do not represent the views of the people and which demonstrates low capacity to solve their problems (Scharpf, 1999). Many of the decision makers are not democratically elected and the links between them and their constituencies are relatively weak (Lindberg, Rasmussen, & Warntjen, 2008).

We focus on how the European Council devotes its attention. Consisting of the Heads of State or Government from all Member States, it is the top informal agenda setter in the EU. Around its establishment in 1975 the European Council was conceived as a regular coordination arena at highest political level, which shall guide the development of the Community and resolve conflicts. Over the course of its existence the body has gradually moved away from an arbitrating function towards setting the agenda for important aspects of the work of the EU (Nugent, 2010; Rasmussen, 2007; Werts, 2008). It has become a body of political leadership which pulls the strains of the integration process to the extent and in the direction of activity it desires. These developments have recently resulted in a long-needed spur in attention to the European Council in EU scholarship (Eggermont, 2012; Foret & Rittelmeyer, 2014a; Werts, 2008).

Due to its informal nature<sup>59</sup> and lack of formal legislative functions the European Council is hardly held accountable by the other EU institutions<sup>60</sup>. It can act as a formation of the Council but only exceptionally does so. Yet, the European Council often places issues on the agendas of other EU bodies: requests the Commission to undertake research on a topic or the Council to speed up decision making in a certain direction. Due to the underlying power relationship these institutions are informally bound to consider such requests (de Schoutheete & Wallace, 2002). Thus, holding the Commission or the Council accountable for certain actions could in practice mean attacking the messenger.

The European Council is free to set its own agenda. Even if this agenda experiences virtually no restrictions in scope and content, especially since the 1990s (Alexandrova et al., 2012; Wessels, 2008b). it is not entirely clear what determines how the European Council allocates attention and prioritizes issues. The national interest is said to be a dominant drive behind the individual positions of Member States' leaders, overshadowing party family linkages and rendering issue-specific coalition building (Tallberg & Johansson, 2008; Tallberg, 2008a). Scholarship has also pointed to the importance of focusing events and "issue inheritance" from previous meetings (Bonvicini & Regelsberger, 1991; Princen & Rhinard, 2006; Westlake & Galloway, 2004). However, whether the views of the public affect the decision of the EU Heads of State or Government to address an issue collectively we still do not know. The lack of academic interest in this topic is surprising and worrisome considering the huge agenda-setting power of the European Council and the ambiguity as to what its discussion points are motivated by.

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<sup>59</sup> The body was listed among the EU institutions only in the Lisbon Treaty, which entered into force in December 2009.

<sup>60</sup> It is only required to present reports to the European Parliament after its meetings, as well as an annual report.

## EU Political Responsiveness?

At first outset, it may seem somewhat paradoxical to expect political responsiveness in the multi-level context of the EU. In a federal, multi-level system, it is harder for voters to stay informed about political decision making, which may prevent them from formulating straightforward preferences that decision makers can respond to (Soroka & Wlezien, 2010; Wlezien & Soroka, 2011). According to Soroka and Wlezien, ‘there is good reason to think that we will have clear policy responsiveness only when we observe clear public responsiveness to policy’ (2010: 52-53).

Moreover, even if the voters could formulate clear preferences on EU policy, the EU literature contains no lack of arguments that it may not pay off for national politicians participating in EU policy either at home or at the EU level to translate such citizen preferences into EU policy. If they are interested in seeking re-election, national vote choice is much more dominated by the positions citizens hold on the left-right dimension than attitudes towards European integration. Quite a long time ago, Reif and Schmitt (1980) developed the notion of ‘second-order elections’ referring to the fact that elections to the European Parliament were used by voters to punish or reward the current governing parties rather than driven by attitudes towards European integration. Their argument was subsequently extended to EU referendums (see e.g. Franklin, Van der Eijk, & Marsh, 1995). At the same time Franklin and Van der Eijk (2004) have pointed out that, even if elections are often not about the EU, Europe may still be ‘a sleeping giant’ of public opinion scepticism towards the European project, which could be woken up by political entrepreneurs politicizing the issue. However, according to Green-Pedersen (2012), we need not worry too much about this scenario. Based on a study of Denmark, he argues that those politicians who would potentially have an incentive to wake up the sleeping giant *cannot*, whereas those who can *do not want to*. In such a world where the issue of Europe is unlikely to be heavily politicized, we would not expect EU decision makers to have an incentive to be very responsive to what the public wants.

Opposed to this view stands an alternative scenario, which gives more ground for expecting national politicians involved in EU policy, such as the Heads of State or

Government in the European Council, to indeed have an incentive to act in line with the wishes of the citizens. First, the political leaders may do so because they have preferences which are in line with those of the citizens. Second, even if this is not the case, they may have a range of other reasons to be responsive. Research shows that European integration exerts *an independent impact* of voter placement on the left-right dimension on electoral choice in domestic elections (see e.g. Evans, 1998; Gabel, 2000), even if this impact may be of a conditional nature (De Vries, 2007). Moreover, several authors have argued that we have seen an increased politicization of the issue of European integration since Maastricht, often emphasizing the role of extreme parties in driving these processes (see e.g. Hooghe & Marks, 2009).

Finally, no matter whether “the EU issue” is salient and politicized, we can still expect political responsiveness at the EU level. European policy today is about a lot more than deciding on the direction and speed of European integration. Europe deals with a range of every-day policies of a regulatory and sometimes distributive nature, which are similar to the issues dealt with in more traditional political systems (Hix & Høyland, 2011). Whether anyone will want to (or can) wake up “the EU giant” is therefore not a precondition for whether we can expect national leaders to be responsive to their citizens in the conduct of EU policy. They need not do so. Instead, what they need is to have an incentive to devote their attention at the EU level among issue areas in line with the policy priorities of their citizens. Such incentives might exist for at least a couple of reasons. First, national politicians have constrained themselves by delegating the competence for many policies in full or in part to the EU. In a number of areas, the only arena for national politicians to respond to citizen concerns is the European one. Second, in an increasingly globalized and interdependent world we can expect national leaders to be faced with a number of citizen concerns, which will be difficult to address at the domestic level only. Externalities put pressure on them to come up with a European response in order to solve the problems.

## **Analysis Design and Data**

The dependent variable in our study is attention to a thematic policy area. We rely on a new dataset of all European Council Conclusions, coded via the EU Policy Agendas Project Codebook. The last represents an adapted version of the Policy Agendas coding system developed by Baumgartner and Jones (2005; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005b), which aims at capturing policy content in political agendas. The Conclusions constitute a list of the issues, which have been discussed by the EU leaders: evaluations of on-going EU activities, attention to relations with third countries and the EU's position in the world, aspirations for and announcements of actions or policy plans, etc. They are content coded at the quasi-sentence level, representing the most fine-grained level of detecting policy content in texts.

Our core independent variable represents a measure for public opinion on a given policy theme derived from the so-called 'most important problem' (MIP) question from Eurobarometer surveys. The exact formulation of the question is: 'What do you think are the two most important issues facing (our country) at the moment?' It presents the respondents with a catalogue of issues; they can select from the list up to two items, which they perceive as the most important policy concerns at the moment. The data for our public opinion measure is available on half annual basis since 2003, which provides us with 20 time points until end 2012.

We have selected ten topics from the European Council's agenda, on which public opinion data on the relative importance attached to these topics by the public across time is available. The policy fields are: economics, education, employment, environment, health, immigration, inflation, law and crime, taxation, and terrorism. The core independent variable is related to the attention of the European Council in the models with a half year lag. A half year lag in response time seems most reasonable in the case of the European Council, which is dealing with current events that often involve a high degree of urgency. Since 2003, it has conducted between 2 and 4 meetings per semester. Thus, in case the European Council responds to changes in the people's concerns in certain policy areas, it can be expected to do so within a

relatively short span of time.<sup>61</sup> In addition, the first lag of preferences is the standard lag used in political responsiveness studies on spending and government activity and policy (Erikson, MacKuen, & Stimson, 2002; Soroka & Wlezien, 2010; Wlezien, 1995).

Our models include several control variables to ensure that any correlation between opinion and policy is not driven by other factors. First, a lagged version of the EU agenda as an independent variable allows us to estimate whether and how strongly attention in two consecutive time periods is related as a result of agenda inheritance. We also consider mean government positions on the left-right continuum and on European integration. These controls are important because party positions on these two scales might potentially influence the willingness of EU leaders to respond to the public's priorities in the different issue areas. The two variables are measured using data from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP), which classifies attention to a list of themes in electoral party programs (Volkens et al., 2011). On the basis of this attention the CMP develops measures of positions on left-right and European integration, which we have extracted for the governing parties in each Member State. In order to come to a general score of the governing parties in the EU at a given point, our main models control for the mean value of all Member States whereas subsequent models use a measure where countries are weighed according to their vote share in the Council of Ministers. The data on both variables is again presented in half-annual terms. In addition, we include different measures of the overall state of economic development of the community since the economic situation might affect the ability of political leaders to respond to the public's priorities. We consider GDP growth, government debt and unemployment. Table 5.1 presents detailed information on all of these variables, including the sources of the data, the way the values have been calculated (where relevant), and descriptive statistics.

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<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the European Council can call last-minute meetings, labelled extraordinary.

Variable	Measurement	Source	Min.	Max.	Mean	St. Dev.
European Council Topic Attention	Proportion of issue attention out of total attention by European Council Conclusions within half year	EU Policy Agendas Project	0	0.359	0.04	0.064
Public Opinion: Most Important Problem	Proportion of citizens who consider an issue as one of the two most important problems facing their country at the moment, half annual data	Euro-barometer	0.02	0.51	0.17	.124
Left-Right Government Position	Position on the left(-) vs. right (+) scale, mean position of all governing parties/ coalitions in in election programs of all MSs for which data is available	Comparative Manifesto Project	-5.349	3.185	-1.373	2.613
Anti-/Pro-EU Government Position	Share of positive attention (+) minus share of negative attention (-) to the EU, mean position of all governing parties/ coalitions in in election programs of all MSs for which data is available	Comparative Manifesto Project	1.665	2.682	2.132	0.279
GDP growth	Percentage change on GDP (at market prices) on previous year, annual data	Eurostat	-4.5	3.4	1.18	2.199
Unemployment	Unemployment rate (seasonally adjusted), half annual data (averaged quarterly values)	Eurostat	6.85	10.6	8.683	1.05
Government debt	Government consolidated gross debt as percentage of GDP, half annual data (averaged quarterly values)	Eurostat	59.45	85.05	68.855	8.849

Table 5.1. List of variables, data sources and descriptive statistics



Figure 5.1 shows the relative share of attention allocated by the European Council to the different policy areas over time as well as the relative prioritisation by the public. Since we have time-series data on ten different policy areas, we conduct the analysis using time-series cross-sectional (TSCS) methods. By doing so, we scrutinize the cross-sectional effects of our independent variables on attention towards different policy areas both at a given point of time and over time. Attention to all policy topics at a given point of time is pooled and predicted by the same regression equation. This model allows us to incorporate more observations and generate meaningful and efficient results despite the relatively short time span of the individual time series.

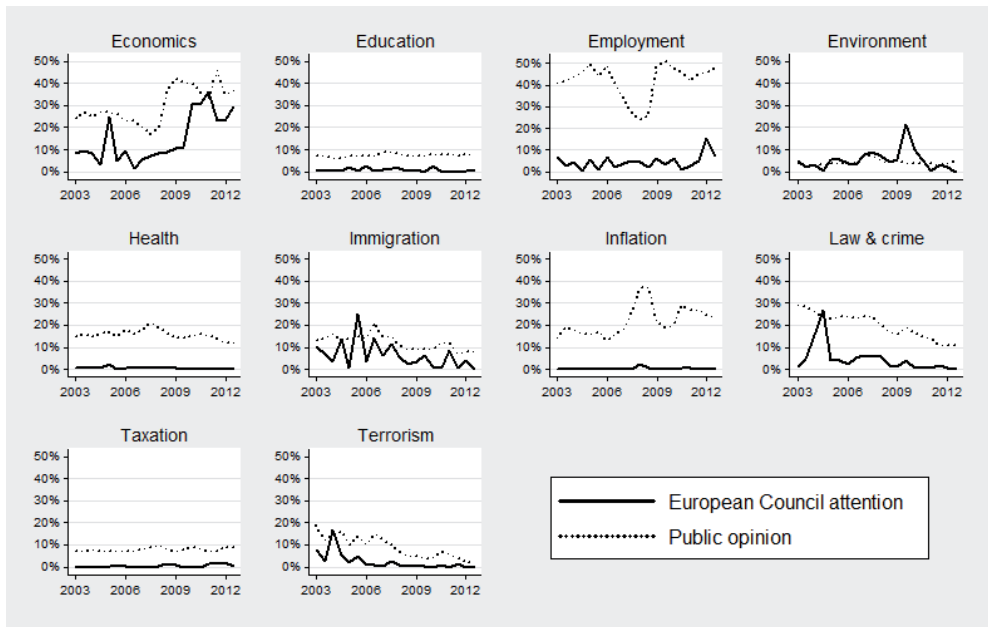


Figure 5.1. European Council half-annual attention patterns to 11 policy areas (2003 – 2012)

Finally, we conduct vector autoregressive Granger tests for TSCS data, following the approach developed by Hood, Kidd, and Morris (2008). This technique has two advantages. First, it allows us to scrutinize the *direction* of relationship by regressing the

potentially endogenous variable (opinion and attention) on past values of itself and the other endogenous variable in single simultaneous system of equations. In our case, we cannot rule out that rather than opinion causing attention, the relationship may work the other way around, meaning that that the attention of politicians could affect the views of the public. Second, the model allows us to deal with causal heterogeneity across subunits. Even if fixed effects TSCS models can account for differences across subunits via different intercepts, they assume that the causal relationship across units is the same. Thus, such a model cannot rule out that the relationship between opinion and attention works differently in different policy areas. The method developed by Hood, Kidd, and Morris (2008) enables us to explicitly test the assumption of causal homogeneity and specify whether and in what possible ways the relationship between opinion and attention differs between policy areas.

Even if Granger tests are commonly referred to as “causality tests” it should be noted that causality is employed as a methodological concept and as such is not equivalent to theoretical causality. The Granger test only examines the direction of relationship between two variables and is not able to account for the potential impact of unobserved variables in a scenario where the true relationship involves three or more variables. This means that, even if employing Granger tests represents a significant improvement over conventional tests, we bear in mind that the Granger estimation does not provide complete certainty of a theoretical, causal link. Importantly, we therefore begin with a full model specification before performing Granger causality tests in order to also consider other theoretically relevant variables.

## **Analysis**

We begin with the simple TSCS OLS regression model predicting the share of attention that the European Council allocates to a given issue area. We use a fixed rather than a random effects model because figure 5.1 indicated that there are systematic differences in the share of attention which the European Council pays to different policy fields. By including fixed effects, we hold policy areas constant in

order to focus on the effect of the independent variables of interest. This choice is further supported by the Hausman test, which indicates that a fixed effects regression is also statistically superior to one with random effects (the last aims to take unit variance into account by including it in the error term). Table 2 shows the results of two fixed effects TSCS OLS regressions: model 1 containing only public opinion and the lagged agenda, whereas model 2 adding the controls for government position (left-right and European integration) and state of the economy.<sup>62</sup> Due to multicollinearity between especially unemployment and government debt we cannot include all three economic controls in a single model. Therefore, we proceed with GDP growth and unemployment in the reported tables but also comment on a model with GDP growth and government debt.

Both model 1 and 2 show a relationship between the public prioritization of a given policy area and the attention towards it in the European Council Conclusions. However, before drawing any conclusions from these OLS models we need to assess whether the core assumptions for a TSCS analysis – homoscedasticity, lack of autocorrelation and lack of cross-sectional correlation – are met. Otherwise, we might be making wrong conclusions, since their estimates are not best, linear, and unbiased. We use model 2 as the basis for a number of tests. According to the modified Wald test for groupwise heteroskedasticity, as suggested by Baum (2001), we find that we must reject the null hypothesis of homoscedasticity in our model. Moreover, after conducting a Wooldridge test for serial correlation in panel data (Drukker, 2003; Wooldridge, 2002) we also see that our model displays serial correlation of the error terms. Finally, we test for the presence of cross-sectional correlation using the Breusch-Pagan LM test of independence, since it is more suitable for datasets where the number of time points is higher than the number of groups (C. F. Baum, 2001). The results show that the null hypothesis of cross-sectional correlation is confirmed. In other words, all three assumptions of the TSCS OLS regression are violated, indicating that we need a model that can correct for all three.

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<sup>62</sup> The lower number of observations is due to missing data for the last two years on the ideology variables.

This leaves us with two options: a model with Driscoll and Kraay standard errors (DKSE), or one with panel-corrected standard errors (PCSE) (Beck & Katz, 1995; Hoechle, 2007).<sup>63</sup> We perform both in order to confirm the robustness of our findings. Before proceeding with this we also tested whether we need to control for fixed effects of the time points, which yielded negative results, wherefore we proceed with fixed effects for policy areas only.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3 DKSE	Model 4 PCSE
Lagged European Council agenda	.255*** (.074)	.061 (.093)	.061 (.220)	.071 (.123)
Lagged Public opinion	.295*** (.071)	.273*** (.080)	.273* (.123)	.272*** (.083)
Left-right government position (averaged)		-.000 (.002)	-.000 (.001)	.000 (.002)
Anti-/pro-EU government position (averaged)		.005 (.018)	.005 (.009)	.005 (.016)
GDP growth		.000 (.002)	.000 (.001)	.000 (.002)
Unemployment		.004 (.005)	.004 (.002)	.004 (.005)
Constant	-.021 (.012)	-.055 (.059)	-.055 (.033)	.003 (.055)

Note: Values for fixed effects not reported; Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < .10$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .01$

Table 5.2. Pooled time-series cross-sectional (TSCS) OLS regressions with fixed effects (for policy area)

<sup>63</sup> A third option would be to use a feasible generalised least squares algorithm but this method is considered to produce unacceptably small standard errors (Beck & Katz, 1995; Hoechle, 2007).

Models 3 and 4 replicate model 2 with the DKSE and PCSE respectively<sup>64</sup>. Despite the differences in the way these models adjust the standard errors in practice, they show similar results. Again we find support of a significant relationship between how strongly the public prioritizes a given issue and how much attention the European Council spends on the policy theme. To find an effect of public opinion in a model that controls for the systematic differences in attention between policy areas is quite remarkable since differences between these policy fields account for a substantial share of the variation. In fact, the fixed effects model has been criticized for eating up too many degrees of freedom and eliminating too much variance.

Interestingly, the party positions of the governments in the European Council on the left-right continuum and towards European integration do not matter. Neither do the economic controls GDP growth and unemployment.<sup>65</sup> There is a significant negative effect of the lagged European Council agenda in the uncontrolled OLS model only. The fixed effects (not reported in the tables) show quite some differences in the attention of the European Council towards different policies exactly as we would expect based on the descriptive overview in figure 5.1.

We proceed further with a causality test to check whether public opinion indeed predicts the level of attention or whether the relationship actually (also) works the other way around. First we examine whether the variables are stationary by performing the Levin-Lin-Chu test for unit root, which is appropriate for datasets that have higher number of time points than sections.<sup>66</sup> The positive results for both public opinion and European Council attention allow us to continue with the Granger causality tests. The first step here is to determine whether one of the variables Granger causes the other for all policy areas collectively. We do this by estimating the  $F_1$  statistic, which compares a sum of squared residuals from an unrestricted model

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<sup>64</sup> The R-squared is not reported in the model with PCSE since the statistic is calculated for the entire system of equations, which can be considered 'meaningless for either equation individually' (Blackwell III, 2005: 205-206).

<sup>65</sup> Running models 3 and 4 with the other pair of economic controls, GDP growth and public debt, yields the same results.

<sup>66</sup> We use the AIC as a selection criterion of the number of lags.

(RSS<sub>1</sub>) to the sum of squared residuals from a restricted model (RSS<sub>2</sub>).<sup>67</sup> Table 5.3 presents the results. The significant F<sub>1</sub> statistics indicates that for at least one (and possibly all policy fields) public opinion Granger causes the level of political attention.<sup>68</sup> The opposite does not hold: the attention spent by the European Council does not Granger cause the preferences in public opinion.

Having confirmed the expected directionality of the relationship, the second step is to conduct a test for its homogeneity across sections, i.e. whether public opinion causes attention in all the examined policy areas. We perform the F<sub>2</sub> test, in which the sum of squared residuals from the unrestricted model (RSS<sub>1</sub>) is again used, this time together with the sum of squared residuals from a restricted model in which the slope terms are constrained to be equal for each cross section in the sample (RSS<sub>3</sub>).<sup>69</sup> An insignificant F<sub>2</sub> statistic would be an indicator of homogeneity and we could stop our tests here. The F<sub>2</sub> statistic for the effect of public opinion on the European Council's political agenda is, however, significant. This means that the causal link between opinion and attention does not hold across all policy areas in the sample. Therefore, we perform further tests to estimate whether public opinion Granger causes the level of attention for each separate policy area. To do so, we calculate the F<sub>3</sub> statistics for all 10 policy areas using the sum of squared residuals from the unrestricted model (RSS<sub>1</sub>) and the sum of squared residuals from a restricted model where the slope coefficient of the cross section at hand is constrained to zero (RSS<sub>2,i</sub>).<sup>70</sup> A significant value indicates the presence of a causal relationship. The results, reported in table 5.4, show that public

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<sup>67</sup>  $F_1 = \frac{\frac{RSS_2 - RSS_1}{Np}}{\frac{RSS_1}{[NT - N(1+p) - p]}}$  where N is the number of policy areas (11), p is the number of lags (1), and T is the number of time periods (17).

<sup>68</sup> Critical values for F statistics based on an F-distribution with Np, NT-N(1+p)-p degrees of freedom.

<sup>69</sup>  $F_2 = \frac{\frac{RSS_3 - RSS_1}{[p(N-1)]}}{\frac{RSS_1}{[NT - N(1+p) - p]}}$

<sup>70</sup>  $F_3 = \frac{\frac{RSS_{2,t} - RSS_1}{p}}{\frac{RSS_1}{[NT - N(1+2p) + p]}}$

opinion Granger causes attention in the European Council in four out of the ten policy areas: economics, environment, immigration, and law and crime.

	F <sub>1</sub> test statistic	F <sub>2</sub> test statistic
Public opinion granger causes European Council attention	4.993***	3.395***
European Council attention granger causes public opinion	.473	–

Notes: \* p < .10; \*\* p < .05; \*\*\* p < .01

Table 5.3. Granger causality tests (half year lag)

	F <sub>3</sub> test statistic
Economics	35.467***
Education	.003
Employment	.001
Environment	3.256***
Health	.009
Immigration	4.353***
Inflation	.009
Law and crime	10.697***
Taxation	.003
Terrorism	.91

Notes: \* p < .10; \*\* p < .05; \*\*\* p < .01

Table 5.4. Granger causality tests (half year lag), F<sub>3</sub> test statistic

Relying on the Granger causality estimation, it seems that we have neither uniform *responsiveness* nor a total lack thereof in the multi-level system of the EU. Instead, our results suggest differentiated responsiveness across policy areas when we look at the link between opinion and attention.

As a final step, we examine whether *the degree of responsiveness* differs between the four areas where it was identified. To do so, we conduct a TSCS regression on a restricted

dataset of the four policy fields where causality is present. The restricted dataset of these four policy fields displays no heteroskedasticity or cross-sectional correlation, but serial correlation is still present. Therefore, we proceed with a model with panel corrected robust standard errors.

	Model 5	Model 6
Lagged European Council agenda	-.085 (.209)	-.086 (.189)
Lagged public opinion	.808** (.156)	.806** (.143)
Left-right government position (averaged)	-.003 (.003)	
Left-right government position (weighted)		-.006* (.002)
Anti-/pro-EU government position (averaged)	.017 (.035)	
Anti-/pro-EU government position (weighted)		.026 (.026)
GDP growth	.001 (.004)	-.001 (.003)
Unemployment	.015** (.004)	.015** (.002)
Constant	-.222* (.078)	-.232* (.040)
N	60	60
R <sup>2</sup>	.310	.319

Note: Values for fixed effects not reported; Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < .10$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.1$

Table 5.5. Pooled time-series cross-sectional (TSCS) OLS regressions with fixed effects and clustered standard errors (for policy area) on a restricted dataset of four policy areas where Granger causality is found



Model 5 (table 5.5) displays the results. Not surprisingly, we find a strong and significant effect of public opinion on political attention in the European Council in this restricted dataset. A one unit increase in the public's prioritization of any of these issues causes a 0.81 unit points increase in attention. The political control variables and GDP growth still show no effect but unemployment becomes significant.<sup>71</sup>

In order to perform a further robustness check we run the same regression with different specifications of the party ideology variables (left-right and anti-pro-EU). Rather than deriving a score from the average position of all Member States (like in the models so far), we weighted the positions of each country by voting shares in the Council of Ministers. Decisions in the European Council are taken by consensus, but it could be argued that not all countries have equal negotiating power. Model 6 presents this alternative specification with ideology weighted per seats in the Council. The results confirm the predictive power of public opinion and the role of unemployment but also present a significant effect of the left-right ideology at the 10 per cent level. The negative sign indicates that when weighted by voting shares in the Council, the more leftist the position of the European Council, the more likely the body is to discuss issues of economics, environment, immigration, and law and crime.

We also performed model 5 with interaction effects for policy area. The overall interaction of the model is significant and there is some difference in the level of responsiveness across policy areas. In particular, the effect of public opinion on political attention is significantly higher on environment than on any of the other three policy domains, as figure 5.2 shows. However, the confidence intervals for economics, immigration, and law and crime largely overlap, suggesting that we cannot infer difference in effect size among these three fields.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Running the model with public debt instead of unemployment yields the same results and the debt variable is not significant.

<sup>72</sup> Estimating marginal effects on model 6 does not change these findings.

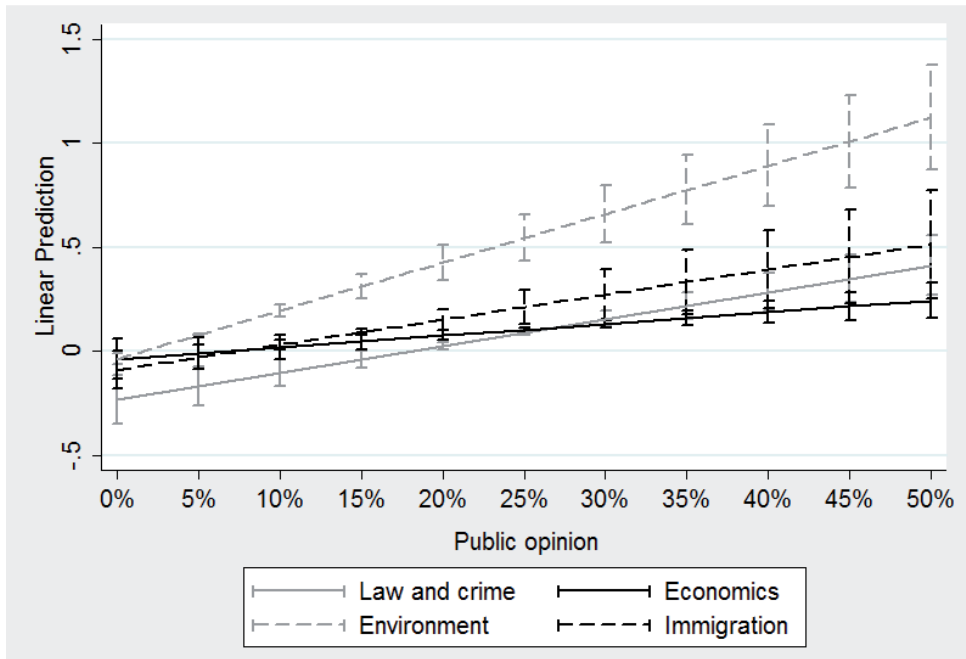


Figure 5.2. Predictive margins for policy area with 95% confidence intervals for model 5

## Discussion

Even if public policy literature argues that policies generate different levels of conflict and controversy (Lowi, 1972; Wilson, 1974), many of the most prominent studies of political responsiveness are conducted at the country level (see e.g. Hakhverdian, 2010; Kang & Powell, 2010; Percival, Johnson, & Neiman, 2009; Stimson, 1991; Stimson, MacKuen, & Erikson, 1994; 1995). Even the studies that do include data at the policy domain level and find variation in degree of opinion–policy linkage often do not theorize what it is about *issue character* that explains the differences (Erikson, 1976; Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008; Jennings & John, 2009; Soroka & Wlezien, 2010; Wlezien, 1995). This is understandable since policy fields are simply units of analysis in most of these studies where the explanatory focus is on other aspects. At the same

the differences in responsiveness identified here between policy areas deserve further attention and the potentially conditional nature of responsiveness between policy fields is one of the matters that could be explored further in the responsiveness literature. Only a minority of studies have made a step in this direction and no consensus has emerged (Brooks, 1985; Edwards III, Mitchell, & Welch, 1995; Jones, 1994; Jones et al., 2009; Lax & Phillips, 2012; Page & Shapiro, 1983; Percival et al., 2009; Wlezien, 2004).

In a multi-level system it would seem logical that the *division of competences* between the different levels would affect whether politicians are responsive. All things equal, we might expect decision makers at a given level to be more responsive to claims in areas where they are *competent* to act. Just as in a national federal system, a responsibility has been delegated to the central, EU level in some areas in contrast to others. According to such an argument, federalism may not only make a difference for political responsiveness in comparisons between federal and non-federal system, but also for comparisons between policy areas within a given political system where the degree of federalism varies. In practice, we do not find responsiveness in areas where the EU has no or limited treaty competences, like taxation, health or education. In contrast, we do find responsiveness in fields with strong EU competences, like environment. But the policy areas which constitute a much more fuzzy mix of competences in terms of scope and level do not fit such an explanatory logic in a straightforward way. For example, in both crime and terrorism there is some level of EU involvement but we find the European Council to be addressing the public's priorities only on the first issue. Hence, using competences alone to predict the differentiated pattern of rhetorical responsiveness provides only a partial account of the reality. An important reason may be that the policy responsibilities of the EU go far beyond what was above referred to as "hard law" and also include "soft law" and other types of competences. Even if the EU cannot produce legislation in a specific policy area, this does not mean that it has no instruments to act and react. In fact, EU politicians – and those operating at the federal level of national multi-level systems – can in principle talk about anything they want. Their agenda is not dictated by whether something is a "hard", "soft" or purely national competence.

However, if we consider the differences in the levels of responsiveness in the four policy areas where the Granger causality tests indicated evidence of a link between public opinion and attention, the competence logic gains some additional leverage. On environment, a domain of shared jurisdiction between the EU and its Member States, the European Council's attention appears to be more strongly influenced by the issue priorities of the citizens than in the three other areas: immigration, crime and economics. In these fields, the EU can be considered to have lower level of competences (see e.g. Börzel, 2005) as well as weaker policy involvement (see e.g. Nugent, 2010). While in environmental matters the Union relies on legal regulation, inter-state cooperation is more prominent on issues related to law and order matters and a mixture of the two is used in macroeconomics.

An important additional consideration than competences when it comes determining dynamic agenda representation is the character of the institution whose responsiveness we analyse. The role perception of the European Council is somewhat different from the remaining core institutions (the European Commission, the Council of Ministers, and the European Parliament). Even if it can in principle deliberate upon any topic it wants, it is first of all responsible for discussing overall political developments of the Community, whereas the remaining institutions are supposed to act as the day-to-day executive and legislative bodies respectively. The perception is that the European Council plays a prominent role in what Hoffman (1966) referred to as high politics themes (Wessels, 2008b) related to the basic existence of the political system (e.g. foreign policy, defence, and monetary matters). And indeed such issues have occupied more extensively the attention of this institution and conditioned the space available on the agenda for other issues (Alexandrova et al., 2012). On topics of vital importance to the existence and survival of the state, the public may be less of a determinant of issue attention. Executives have to deal with such topics anyway whereas they can have freedom to display varying levels of attention to areas outside their core portfolio (Bevan & Jennings, 2013). But when the agenda is already much loaded with high politics themes in the traditional sense, the competition for attention among the remaining topics is quite fierce.

## **Conclusion**

Political responsiveness is a complex issue in a multi-level context due to the difficulties in transmitting information and keeping political leaders responsible. Yet we have few studies that systematically examine political responsiveness in such contexts outside the US. We focused on the EU system, which could be seen as a particularly hard case for detecting political responsiveness due to its distance between voters and political decision makers, many of whom do not have a democratic mandate. Our study adds to the limited body of existing literature by conducting the first analysis of rhetorical responsiveness in this context, focusing on the link between public opinion and attention rather than actual policy outputs in a study of dynamic agenda representation. We connected a new dataset on the European Council's policy agenda with public opinion data and a range of other sources. Attention is particularly important in a multi-level context, such as the EU, where decision makers at the central level may not have the competence of responding to citizens in many areas by issuing hard law. Moreover, rather than linking aggregate attitudes to European integration to total volume of outputs we conduct our analysis at the policy field level. The EU has gradually become more similar to a domestic political system and daily adopts many different kinds of specific policies (Hix & Høyland, 2011). Therefore, reacting to the public is not necessarily about integrating more or less, but about paying attention to the range of everyday policy issues which the citizens care about.

Despite the negative prospects of achieving high political responsiveness in multi-level systems in general and in the EU in particular, it is noteworthy that we find a general link between opinion and attention in our cross-sectional time series analysis. However, after introducing vector autoregressive Granger tests into our TSCS framework, we see that responsiveness is not uniform but present only in a subset of policy areas consisting of economic, environmental, immigration- and crime-related issues. Furthermore, public prioritization has a stronger effect on the European Council's agenda on environment compared to the other three areas.

These results provide scope for theorizing about the potential variation in the link between opinion and attention across policy fields in future research. Many studies

including data at the policy areas level do not attempt to do so since policy areas mainly serve as units of analysis in research with explanatory focus on something else. Moreover, among those that do no consensus has emerged on the logic behind the differential pattern of responsiveness found in the policy areas up to now.

Our discussion indicates that the distribution of policy competences within a multi-level system may provide important insights into how levels of responsiveness vary between policy areas. However, they also underline that a competence explanation alone is unlikely to be sufficient. Instead, we suggest that explanations of variation in political responsiveness should also be sensitive to *the way responsiveness is measured* and *the kind of institution* whose responsiveness we examine. The fact that we find relationship outside core areas of EU legislative jurisdiction is not too surprising since we analyse the link between public opinion and policy attention rather than effective responsiveness through for example legislative production. This rhetorical type is likely to be much less influenced by the portfolio of competences legislators possess than effective responsiveness. Many political institutions have the opportunity to define their own agenda and to debate issues irrespective of jurisdictional boundaries. This is not least the case due to the special character of the European Council.

In this way, reasoning which always requires responsiveness to follow a fixed pattern within a given policy field may be less appropriate. Instead, a prominent avenue might be to explore more *dynamic* explanations, which would allow for variations in responsiveness on issue domains. At a given point of time, policy areas include a mix of topics of varying character and even a specific issue can inhibit variation in its character over time.

# 6. Upsetting the Agenda: The Clout of Focusing Events in the European Council

## Abstract

Focusing events are sudden striking large-scale occurrences which attract political attention. But not all potential focusing events appear on the agenda, and the attention they eventually receive also differs. Combining data from multiple sources, this study conducts the first systematic analysis of determinants of attention to focusing events in the EU over a period longer than two decades. The results demonstrate that decisions regarding the overall placement of crises on the European Council agenda are underscored by event typology and geopolitical considerations. Man-made incidents are more likely to be discussed than natural disasters, as are focusing events taking place in neighbouring countries than elsewhere in the world. The level of attention each event receives depends on geopolitical and economic ties. Focusing events in neighbouring countries receive a higher portion of attention, as do also crises in states having larger trade exchange with the EU.

## Introduction

Focusing events are by default magnets for attention by everyone, often on a global scale. Political leaders regularly need to respond to such dramatic occurrences within and more often outside the territory of their polity. They do so first and foremost by spending part of their time on the event. This can come in the form of condolences, expression of sympathy with victims and suffering populations, condemnation of inhumane acts, etc. The initial reaction can later bring about more substantial policy responses, such as the provision of humanitarian aid or involvement in a military

coalition. Disasters and incidents abroad can also trigger rethinking of domestic policies and materialise in substantial changes. In the EU, the top institution which can transmit the single voice of the Union to its citizens and the rest of the world is the European Council. On its regular meetings, which over the years have grown in number, the Heads of State and Government have addressed a multiplicity of issues and the agenda in many cases had to be readjusted to reflect focusing events. The recent European Council in October 2013 includes an example of this kind – a statement on intelligence concerns in relation to the USA after a scandal on this matter erupted.

Not all focusing events are equal, and their power to elicit attention and potentially modify the course of policy varies tremendously. While there is some evidence on the conditions under which dramatic sudden occurrences exercise influence over policy, their relationship with political attention is generally taken for granted. Yet, some phenomena seem to have easier time in resetting the agenda, while others are passed by with silence. For example, the European Council came up with a declaration on the devastating Iranian earthquake of June 1990 but did not mention even a word about the recent disaster of the same type in Haiti in January 2010. While the cost of both events was estimated to be relatively similar, the number of casualties and people affected was more than five times bigger in the second case.<sup>73</sup> Another example can be traced in two terrorist attacks with comparatively similar number of injured and killed hostages in Russia during the first half of the 2000s. The Beslan school siege (September 2004) was not mentioned in any way in the official account of European Council meetings, whereas the Moscow theatre hostage crisis (October 2002) provoked a declaration full of shock and condemnation.

The logic of reasoning when making the political decision to discuss a disaster, accident or violent attack is largely unexplored. This chapter aims at making a step in this grey area of research by theorising on the conditions under which responsiveness can occur in the first place and subsequently more attention can be allocated. It utilises a number of existing datasets, combining data on different kinds of focusing

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<sup>73</sup> See EM-DAT database.



events with data on political attention in the European Council. The analysis covers the period 1975–2012, with data on some of the independent variables beginning in 1988/1989 only. The chapter proceeds with an elaboration on the concept focusing event and its relation to attention in political institutions, followed by a theoretical discussion of the factors that could underline in this relationship. Afterwards the role of the European Council in addressing urgent matters is explained and the hypotheses are presented. Further on the data are described and the analysis is conducted. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the findings.

## **Focusing Events and Agenda Setting**

Focusing events occupy a special place in political agenda setting. They are powerful occurrences which can disturb the priorities of the day. Their power is often derived from a background of deterioration on a specific issue to which they add urgency by acting as a trigger for attention (Kingdon, 1984), leading to what Downs (1972) conceptualized as ‘alarmed discovery’. A focusing event can serve to underline the size of a given problem, unlock mismanagement in prevention mechanisms or signal at distance for potential future failures. It can present the necessary conditions for redefining an issue, which would then allow it to appear on the top political agenda (Princen, 2011). The crucial traits of focusing events are suddenness and rarity. They usually affect a large amount of people and become known to the general public and key members of the policy community simultaneously (Birkland, 1997).

Based on the attributes identified by Birkland, many events can be classified as focusing. The classical types are natural disasters and industrial accidents but this scope has been broadened to what Birkland calls ‘deliberately caused catastrophes’ (2006), such as terrorist attacks or civil wars. Some authors claim a distinction between crises and focusing events (Nohrstedt & Weible, 2010) but a dividing line between the two is usually hard to draw, and crises are more often considered a subcategory of focusing events (Faulkner, 2001) or the two terms are used interchangeably (Boin et

al., 2005).<sup>74</sup> A focusing event can come in any form: from a blast of a nuclear reactor, like the Fukushima disaster in March 2011, to a piece of investigative journalism that reveals a hideous story, such as the recent eavesdropping scandal that shook the relationship between Germany and the USA (see e.g. Alink, Boin, & t'Hart, 2001). Some scholars suggest that crises tend to involve a sense of threat, urgency and uncertainty (Boin et al., 2005). Yet, these features can be considered common but not necessary conditions for focusing events and therefore should not be included in a definition of the concept. Dramatic events usually involve some threatening aspects but they can also be reverted, signalling enthusiasm. The fall of the Berlin Wall, giving way to the end of communist regimes in Eastern Europe & the USSR is such an example from a Western perspective. In short, a focusing event can be defined as *a striking sudden occurrence of a large scale disturbing simultaneously the daily routine of individuals and the policy status quo, and carrying the potential of emotional appeal.*

Focusing effects are prone to attracting vast attention by the public, politicians and policy makers due to the mechanism of disproportionate information processing which is a guiding factor both for humans and organisations (Jones, 2001). We tend to stick to the status quo in decision-making processes because a step aside involves additional investment of time and potentially other resources. This creates conditions for reacting to incoming information signals as little as possible, which in practice means underreacting. But while negative indicators build up and organisations ignore most of the signals delivering this information, a striking piece, coming in the form of a focusing event can shake the stability of the status quo. In turn, this will result in overreaction aimed to compensate for the missed opportunities (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005b). The described mechanism presents a long term perspective on the policy agenda as a sum of many small incremental changes and a bunch of very large punctuations in attention.

The reaction can have long-term consequences and materialize in policy changes, usually involving multiple instruments. However, before having repercussions for policy, it first affects attention. The manner of triggering attention and possible

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<sup>74</sup> For the purposes of this chapter the two concepts are used as synonyms.

overreaction is straightforward and logical. Yet this does not mean that all *potential focusing events* will materialise as points on the agenda. Scholars have so far shown interest in disentangling the reasons behind one crisis resulting in policy change and others not (e.g. Nohrstedt, 2008; Walgrave & Varone, 2008) but the consequences for attention which forms a stage before policy change have largely been taken for granted. An exception to this is a recent study by van Assche (2012) on the Belgian executive agenda, who finds that some 40 per cent of the large punctuations in attention are related to focusing events (whereas elections and leadership change seem not to matter). The study however stops there and does not dig deeper into the reasons behind why some focusing events made it to the agenda and contributed to the significant increases in attention.

Thus, the question what determines the fact that some sudden striking large-scale occurrences are attended to and others ignored remains a puzzle. The purpose of this chapter is to shed more light on it by considering various characteristics of focusing events and relating those to the presence of events on the agenda and level of political attention. In this way it constitutes a first attempt to draw parallels between attributes of focusing events and the immediate consideration these occurrences receive. The chapter tests hypotheses explaining the overall ability of focusing events to upset the European Council agenda and the extent to which this takes place.

## **The European Council as a Venue for Focusing Events**

Agenda setting in the EU can follow two logics – from below and from above. In the latter, issue initiation is triggered by agreement between the Heads of State and Government in the European Council who recognise a ‘shared political problem’; this problem is ‘often highlighted by a symbolic event’ (Princen & Rhinard, 2006: 1121). Response to a crisis is inducing higher involvement from this institution compared to the European Commission (Bocquillon & Dobbels, 2014). Thus, the European Council, as the top political body in the EU, is the most suitable arena for addressing focusing events. It represents a venue vis-à-vis the rest of the world which can convey

the single voice of the community. Moreover, as an institution which has continuously expanded the jurisdictional boundaries of the Union (Bulmer & Wessels, 1987), the European Council can use a dramatic occurrence to propose policy initiatives that eventually deepen integration further.

Focusing events have triggered increased attention and policy changes in various sectors in the EU – from sports (García, 2007) to energy security (Sauter, 2008; see also Ackrill & Kay, 2011; Moschella, 2011). The involvement of the Union in responses to international crises has increased in recent years (Boin, Ekengren, & Rhinard, 2013). It is largely recognised that important current events constitute a key element on the European Council agenda (Bulmer & Wessels, 1987; Princen, 2012; Wessels, 2008b). Discussion of unexpected issues of high urgency is a common phenomenon. With the expansion of the number of addressed topics and the burden of extremely overcrowded agenda throughout the 1990s, a need for more regular meetings was witnessed and some of those meetings were converted into informal ones. Notably, the European Council invented an instrument of last resort which could allow it to address unexpected matters of high priority almost immediately – the calling of an extraordinary meeting (Werts, 2008). The first such summit was held in April 1990 in relation to the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the prospect of German Unification. By the end of 2012 there have been 7 extraordinary meetings. This institutional innovation only underlined the important role of the European Council in addressing focusing events in the EU, which from an international relations perspective corresponds well with the Union's ambition to be a global power.

## **The Logic of Reaction to Focusing Events**

A focusing event involves an exogenous and an endogenous aspect. The occurrence itself comes from 'outside', strikes as lightening and carries a number of characteristics, such as a perpetrator type, scale of affected people and infrastructure, location. These are all exogenous features for the political elite, which takes the decision whether to react to what has happened. Yet, for a *potential focusing event* to

become an *effective focusing event*, attention with a high emotional load is needed. This element is endogenous to the reactant because attention is always venue-bound. Therefore, an analysis of reasons for responsiveness to focusing events needs to consider internal properties of the latter, as well as features of the venue that relate to the focusing events' properties and the overall nature of the agenda.

Exogenous characteristics of focusing events comprise type and magnitude. Focusing events can be classified in two groups – natural and man-made disasters (Birkland, 1997; 1998). Faulkner (2001) elaborates on the meaning of this distinction, discriminating between events induced by the actions or inactions of organisations versus such induced by natural phenomena or external human action. The distinction is also similar to Deborah Stone's (1989; 2002) classification of human actions as unguided or purposeful in her analysis of causal stories.<sup>75</sup> For example, the recent tsunami in the Philippines in November 2013 can be regarded as a natural disaster. A terrorist attack, like the Madrid train bombings in 2004, on the other hand, represents a purposeful human action that envisaged reaching particular effects.<sup>76</sup> The basic typology of focusing events can have consequences for political attention due to the repercussions on policy. Spending attention is a first step in signalling that policy-makers are determined to prevent potential future similar cases, and prevention seems more likely to succeed in man-made accidents. Moreover, purposeful human actions are often discussed with the purpose of allocating blame, which can later be used in sanctioning or policy development.

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<sup>75</sup> Stone draws a second line of distinction on the extent to which an event is amenable to human intervention, or its consequences are intended versus unintended (see also Gundel, 2005 for a similar distinction).

<sup>76</sup> Even if it seems straightforward, the distinction between natural and man-made focusing event is not undisputed, because as Stone points out different actors attempt to portray the problem associated with the dramatic occurrence via different lenses. While accounting for such volatility in depiction is crucial when analysing the development of a single issue across venues, considering a fixed typology from the perspective of a single institutional venue, such as the European Council, does not involve bias. Moreover, most sudden events with large scale negative effects are framed predominantly as belonging to a single type.

Although by definition the magnitude of a focusing event is considered to be high, even a substantial scope varies (Faulkner, 2001). The extent of harm can be measured in number of casualties (dead and injured), damage to property and infrastructure, or total cost to the economy (see e.g. Alexander, 1997). A catastrophe might strike really hard both when it is caused by human beings and by nature. This determinant should be expected to play a role irrespective of whether the event is domestic or occurs in a distant country, since loss of people's lives infringes upon the most basic human right. Events with high number of casualties also have strong emotional appeal to the public which might additionally induce a reaction from political elites. Studies on media coverage of various events (e.g. natural disasters or hazard events) have found an effect of the number of casualties and extent of damage on the level of reporting (Freudenburg et al., 1996; Van Belle, 2000). A similar logic can be applied to political agendas.

Endogenous factors which could influence attention allocation to focusing events consist of two categories. First, they can reflect a certain relationship between the venue addressing the occurrence or its political system broadly and the country/region in which the event takes place. Most studies on focusing events analyse domestic catastrophes as these are the ones with direct impact on policy learning (Birkland, 1997; 2006; Jensen, 2011; Suarez, 2011). However, it is recognised that 'geographically distant crises can also cast shadows on polities in which they did not occur' (Chien, 2013: 118). While this does not necessary materialise in policy changes, external focusing events do increase attention to problems (Chien, 2013; Nohrstedt, 2008). Spending attention to foreign crises might depend on geopolitical or economic considerations. Evidence from media research demonstrates that geographical proximity plays a role in the size of news coverage on natural disasters (Adams, 1986; Boydston, 2013). Trade flows between countries are found to be a determinant of overall foreign news reporting (Pietiläinen, 2006; Wu, 2000), which can potentially have an impact to the subset of news including focusing events only. In this respect attention allocated in policy venues should be similar to media attention since the logic of geopolitical proximity and economic ties is applicable to a polity rather than a single venue within it.

A second type of endogenous factor relates to the nature of a venue's agenda with its capacity to incorporate more issues and extend discussion time. As agenda setting theories pose, issues compete for attention (Baumgartner & Jones, 2005; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005b) and focusing events represent issues with potential to disturb the pre-scheduled agenda. But the possibility of addressing a specific crisis might be expected to depend on the number of last-minute intruding elements and the free space for additional agenda points. The latter is a reflection of the composition of the agenda and the conflict over the issues present there.

To sum up, the factors which potentially influence the choice for spending attention to a particular focusing event and its level can be classified as exogenous and endogenous. The first category encompasses the type and magnitude of the event. The second one involves two elements – the relationship between the spatial contexts of the event and the venue allocating attention (for foreign cases), and the agenda capacity.

## **Expectations for Responsiveness**

This section presents the hypotheses derived on the basis of the theoretical discussion above. Each hypothesis applies to both research questions of the study. The exogenous and endogenous factors are expected to relate to political attention in the European Council in two ways – exercise effect on the likelihood of an issue (a) to appear on the agenda and (b) to receive more attention in relative terms. It is important to consider these two questions separately as the reasons which play a role in the political decision making on each of them do not to follow the same logic.

Exogenous factors consist of type and magnitude of the focusing events. Following the basic distinction between human-caused and natural occurrences, response should be more prominent in the first case due to two reasons. First, incidents occurring with human intervention, such as eruptions of civil wars or terrorist attacks have a higher chance of being prevented in the future if they are tackled with due care.

Second, acts committed by people involve political blame allocation, and possible sanctioning in the longer term.

*H1a: Man-made incidents are more likely to appear on the agenda than natural disasters.*

*H1b: Man-made incidents are likely to attract more attention than natural disasters.*

The magnitude of a focusing event can be expected to have a positive relationship with attention dynamics. Magnitude can be measured in total number of direct human victims, amount of people affected, or incurred costs. Considering vast differences across specific focusing events, the number of deaths is probably the most comparable indicator. While not encompassing all potential focusing events, it relates to a broad range of cases, such as incidents in conflicts, terrorist attacks, most types of disasters, etc.

*H2a: The higher the number of killed human beings as a consequence of a focusing event, the higher the chance for it to feature on the agenda.*

*H2b: The higher the number of killed human beings as a consequence of a focusing event, the higher the chance for this event to attract more attention.*

Spending attention to foreign crises might depend on geographical/geopolitical or economic considerations regarding the relationship with the foreign country in which the event occurs. In terms of geopolitics, it seems plausible to expect that catastrophes in immediate or close neighbours have an easier time making it to the agenda, since the repercussions of dramatic events can be easily felt close to the border. For example, the EU should care more about the wars in former Yugoslavia than civil wars in sub-Saharan Africa due to the proximity of the treat and consequences of the conflict, such as refugee flows. Thus, we could expect that:

*H3a: The closer the country of the focusing event geographically, the higher the chance any attention to be dedicated to the event.*



*H3b: The closer the country of the focusing event geographically, the higher the chance more attention to be dedicated to the event.*

A geopolitical line of reasoning suggests that the EU should be caring more about countries with which it has a special kind of relationship. Thus, rather than to geographical neighbours, proximity to strategic partners might be important. For example, while the USA is not a geographically close neighbour, it is a crucial political partner for the EU in many areas not least by being a member of NATO.

*H4a: Focusing events in countries involved in a strategic partnership with the EU are more likely to appear on the agenda than those occurring in the rest of the world.*

*H4b: Focusing events in countries involved in a strategic partnership with the EU are more likely to attract more attention than those occurring in the rest of the world.*

A second type of territorial logic might concentrate on economic conditions, since the wellbeing of citizens at home can be threatened by destabilising events in particular key countries. This explanatory line can be operationalised in two manners – in terms of trade exchanges or strategic raw materials. Trade flows between the EU and the country in which a disaster, vast-scale accident or conflict happens can be disrupted or in any case put in danger do to the occurrence.

*H5a: The higher the trade volume between a state and the EU, the stronger chance of appearing on the agenda a focusing event occurring in that state will have.*

*H5b: The higher the trade volume between a state and the EU, the greater the level of attention a focusing event occurring in that state will gain.*

Besides overall economic ties, a more specific criterion might account for responsiveness. The EU is largely dependent for energy imports on third countries. The first and second oil crises have shown how disturbing real and perceived shortages of the ‘black gold’ can be for the economy at large. More recent disputes between Russia and Ukraine demonstrated the crucial role of gas imports for some member states. Thus, maintaining stability in countries importing oil, gas and related products is of strategic importance for the EU.

*H6a: The higher the imports of energy-related products to the EU from a given country, the more likely it is for a focusing event occurring in that country to appear on the agenda.*

*H6b: The higher the imports of energy-related products to the EU from a given country, the more likely it is for a focusing event occurring in that country to receive more attention.*

Another type of endogenous factor that needs to be controlled for is agenda capacity constraints, in particular diversity of the agenda and the level of competition between events. Crises are always addressed as shortly as possible after they happen. For the European Council this means spending attention to the issue on the next possible meeting or in exceptional circumstances calling a summit earlier. But the pre-planned agenda which could be upset by the sudden critical event could be more or less receptive to new items depending on the amount of issues already present. Very few discussed points are mostly a reflection of complexity in reaching agreement on a single issue (i.e. leaving no time for additional matters). A generally broader range of topics for deliberation suggests lower costs in switching between issues and leaving a bit of space for new ones.

*H7a: The more diverse the agenda, the higher the chance focusing events to be addressed.*

*H7b: The more diverse the agenda, the higher the chance focusing events to receive more attention.*

Focusing events do not happen one at a time. Certain periods feature a lower number of crises which in turn reduces the pool from which decision makers can select matters. When events occur in vast quantity at the same time, the probability of addressing each of them individually should be lower as a result of the fierce competition.

*H8a: The higher the number of focusing events occurring at a particular point in time, the lower the likelihood that any of them will receive attention.*

*H8b: The higher the number of focusing events occurring at a particular point in time, the lower the likelihood for any of them to receive more attention.*

## **Data and Approach**

No unified collection of focusing events exists, but various documented records of specific types of crises have been compiled. Combining elements of them allows creating a pool approximating a database of possible focusing events in the world. This study proposes combining three such collections. The International Emergency Disaster Database (EM-DAT)<sup>77</sup> is used to record natural disasters and industrial accidents. For measuring the eruptions of violent conflicts, the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme/Peace Research Institute Oslo (UCDP/PRIO) Armed Conflict Dataset is utilised.<sup>78</sup> The RAND Database on Worldwide Terrorism Incidents (RDWTI) provides a list of terrorist attacks.<sup>79</sup> All three data sources contain information on the number of people killed in a focusing event and the geographic location of the crisis, and overall cover the period 1975–2012. Exceptions to this constitute the terrorism data, ending in 2010, and the records on number of people killed in violent conflicts, commencing in 1989.

Since these databases are not developed to trace focusing events as such but any historical event within the domain of its type, the amount of entries is in some cases quite large and not all events listed can be considered focusing. In particular, many incidents are not of large scale which is one the characteristics of a focusing event. Therefore, the extraction of the data from two of the sources has been based on scale-related conditions. Disasters have been considered when the number of killed was at least 1000 or the people affected at least 10,000, yielding 3676 cases. Terrorist attacks have been included when the casualties (injured or killed humans) have reached the

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<sup>77</sup> Available at: <http://www.emdat.be/database>.

<sup>78</sup> Available at:

[http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/datasets/ucdp\\_prio\\_armed\\_conflict\\_dataset/](http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/datasets/ucdp_prio_armed_conflict_dataset/).

<sup>79</sup> Available at: <http://www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/terrorism-incidents.html>.

number 100, providing us with 189 events. The armed conflicts database has been used in full, with its 1488 cases.<sup>80</sup> The total number of focusing events in the final database is 5353.

In order to identify the presence focusing events on the European Council's agenda and the attention spent to them, a new dataset of the Conclusions issued by this institution after its regular meetings is utilised.<sup>81</sup> Developed within the EU Policy Agendas Project (Alexandrova et al., 2014), it covers the period 1975–2012 and includes the full text of all Conclusions coded for policy content.<sup>82</sup> The dataset has been extended for the purpose of this chapter to signify the sections dedicated to or based on the occurrence of focusing events.<sup>83</sup> This allows creating a pool of all focusing events referred to by the European Council, as well as detecting the extent of attention each of them has received as a share of the whole agenda of a particular meeting.

It should be noted that not all items classified in the European Council Conclusions could be found in the constructed focusing events database. For example, the Tanker Amoco Cadiz crash (1978) and Prestige wreck (2002) causing large oil spills were not present in the disasters dataset. Another example can be seen in international crises, such as the financial crisis of 2008 or the oil crises of the 1970s. While these unintended exclusions limit the pool of focusing events discussed in the European Council, the reduction in data is systematic and should not affect the final results. Moreover, most of the excluded events are of such types that they do not correspond to the overall measurements of effects. The oil spills, for an instance, do not have human casualties but environmental impact and the two are clearly not directly comparable.

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<sup>80</sup> Only one entry has been excluded due to overlap with the RDWTI data.

<sup>81</sup> Available at: <http://www.policyagendas.eu/data.html>.

<sup>82</sup> The European Council began regular meetings in 1975.

<sup>83</sup> A section is not always fully dedicated to the occurrence of the focusing event but often starts with this occurrence and moves further to other issues brought forward by it.

Besides these data a few additional sources are consulted in order to classify the EU relationship with countries in the world for the purposes of hypotheses 3-6. As neighbouring countries are considered all EU member states prior to the date of their accession (e.g. Sweden before 1995), the current countries within the European Neighbourhood Policy, EFTA members, and the states of the Western Balkans. For categorising strategic partners the current classification of the EU on this term is applied.<sup>84</sup> The total volume of external trade between the EU and third countries is recorded on an annual basis from Eurostat (available since 1988).<sup>85</sup> Also from Eurostat, yearly data on imports of energy-related products, i.e. oils, gases and similar products from all third states is gathered (available since 1988).<sup>86</sup> The two agenda capacity measures are calculated on the basis of the existing data. The number of focusing events constitutes a measure of all events contained in the 5353-cases database calculated per year. Agenda diversity is estimated via the Shannon's H index, also measured on an annual basis.

It should be noted that the entries in database correspond to single events in the case of terrorist attacks and disasters but constitute annual entries for conflicts. Therefore, attention has been aggregated in the latter case to reflect yearly discussions. While this might seem to suggest lack of systematicity, in fact it does not pose a real problem since yearly violent conflicts represent a sum of a range of incidents. Table 6.1 presents descriptive statistics for all variables. It does so for the full dataset (used in hypotheses a) and a subset of it containing only the pool of entries corresponding to focusing events discussed by the European Council (used in hypotheses b).

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<sup>84</sup> It covers 10 states: Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, and the USA. See <http://strategicpartnerships.eu/>.

<sup>85</sup> Derived from [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/international\\_trade/data/database](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/international_trade/data/database).

<sup>86</sup> Chapter 27 of the Harmonised System of tariff nomenclature (HS2-HS4): Mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation; bituminous substances; mineral waxes. Derived from [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/international\\_trade/data/database](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/international_trade/data/database).

	<u>All focusing events</u>				<u>Subset focusing events on the agenda</u>			
	Obs.	Mean	St. dev.	Min. Max.	Obs.	Mean	St. dev.	Min. Max.
Focusing events (D)	5353	.025	.155	0 1				
Attention to focusing events					134	.06	.105	.001 1
N killed people	3901	1071.245	13405.13	0 610000	101	9160.119	38117.7	8 300000
Neighbouring country (D)	5353	.083	.276	0 1	134	.396	.491	0 1
Strategic partner (D)	5353	.236	.425	0 1	134	.112	.316	0 1
External trade volume	4078	30145.02	71763.6	.38 434421.2	98	14215.71	40021.94	16.05 260172.8
Oil-related imports	4078	1521.265	8564.572	0 163082.4	98	1135.462	3988.683	0 26537.32
Agenda diversity	5353	2.304	.248	1.667 2.688	134	2.277	.218	1.818 2.688
N focusing events/year	5353	154.662	42.141	49 237	134	142.448	37.061	67 237

Notes: D in parentheses designates a dummy variable

Table 6.1. Descriptive statistics

## Attention to Focusing Events in the European Council

The total number of unique focusing events identified in the European Council Conclusions is 114. Figure 6.1 displays the frequency of all of them per meeting. On over half of all summits (55 per cent) a crisis of some kind triggered attention. More often a single event was mentioned but in substantive amount of cases the number went up to between 2 and 5. Some focusing events were addressed more than once on consecutive meetings because of the prominence of the issue, its evolving nature (e.g. escalation of a conflict), or both. This pulls up the total number of events (unique and repeated ones) discussed in all meetings to 257.

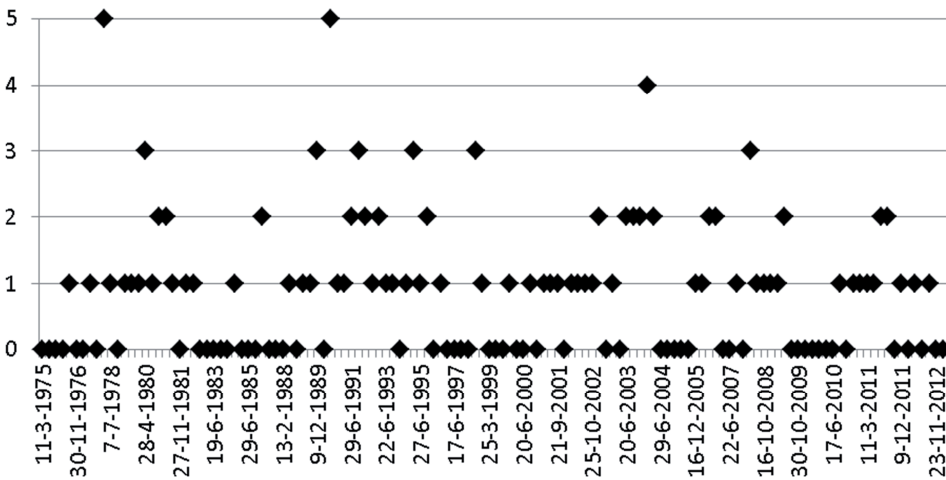


Figure 6.1. Frequency of unique focusing events on the European Council agenda, 1975-2012

Ten per cent of all the text in the European Council Conclusions is associated with a focusing event.<sup>87</sup> Within this share most of the attention (some 70 per cent) goes to external or international events, covering especially the domains of general foreign affairs and peace and security but touching upon a range of other issues, in particular

<sup>87</sup> This attention is divided approximately in half between unique and repeated cases.

civil rights and immigration. The crises occurring within the EU or seen through the prism of domestic effects are related to a range of themes, the most prominent of which being law and crime, energy, and business and finance. Considering the typology of focusing events, it appears that four fifths of the unique cases are man-made. They feature eruptions of violent conflicts and wars, terrorist attacks and a few specific cases like invasions, assassinations, nuclear tests, etc. Natural disasters (floods, tsunami, and earthquakes) and famine are among the most common kinds of unguided actions with unintentional consequences.

The quantity of attention received by different crises and catastrophes also varies. On six summits the whole agenda of the European Council consisted of issues stemming directly from a focusing event. These meetings were extraordinary (4), informal (1), or both (1). The events comprised the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Iraq disarmament crisis, the start of the Russia-Georgia war, the beginning of the Arab Spring, the Second Intifada in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the Fall of the Berlin Wall. All of these besides the key step in the Middle East conflict were powerful enough to require the calling of an extraordinary meeting. Had there been a meeting scheduled shortly afterwards the attention would probably have been lower in relative terms. For the rest of the summits attention fluctuated between a tiny portion and a substantive amount. The mean share of attention to focusing events at all meetings including at least one occurrence is 23 per cent with a standard deviation of 24.

The total number of focusing events incorporated in the final dataset – 134 (as presented in table 6.1) – differs from the frequency of focusing events addressed in the Conclusions – 114 unique cases, or 257 in total including repeated ones. Besides the already mentioned exclusion of some events (like oil spills) this discrepancy is due to two other reasons. First, in the final dataset, some events that were mentioned as a single case in the European Council are included as multiple entries because the discussion on the agenda referred to a region, rather than a country. Examples include hurricane Mitch in Central America in 1998 and famine in the Sahel region in 1983. Third, some conflict-related events that were repeatedly discussed in the European Council are reduced to a single annual entry due to the structure of the conflict data. Examples comprise the Second Intifada in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which was



discussed on 3 meetings in 2002, and the Syrian Civil War present on the agenda of 4 summits in 2012. Therefore, the final dataset covers 184 focusing events found in the Conclusions, 62 of which are unique.

## **Analysing the Agenda-Upsetting Effect**

The analysis proceeds in two steps. First, the hypotheses are tested on the full version of the dataset in order to answer the question what determines the appearance of focusing events on the European Council agenda (a). The dependent variable here is dichotomous indicating whether each of the 5353 crises was discussed at all or not (see table 6.1). Therefore a logistic regression is used. The second step in the analysis addresses the question what determines the level of attention a focusing event receives. Here the dependent variable corresponds to the segment of attention each focusing event has been allocated as a share of the total agenda of the respective meeting. Thus, it contains only a subset of 134 focusing events featured in the full dataset, which the European Council referred to. In this case a fractional logic model is utilised as it is the most suitable method for fractional dependent variables, i.e. ranging between zero and one and including the extremes (Papke & Wooldridge, 1996).

Table 6.2 presents the first analysis. The type of focusing event indeed has an effect on agenda access (H1a). Considering the full model (7), it appears that if a focusing event is man-made, it has a 5.13 per cent higher probability to appear on the agenda. The relevance of number of people killed in a conflict (H2a) is not so straightforward. It does not seem to matter in the simple model (controlling only for agenda capacity factors) but becomes significant in the full model. Performing model 7 with an added interaction effect between event type and number of victims (not shown) yields a significant interaction suggesting that man-made focusing events with higher number of casualties might be more likely to fall in the spotlight of attention. Therefore, it seems that we need a more fine grained measure of number of deaths, sensitive to incident type. The same number of killed humans in different types of focusing events

(especially disasters versus man-made catastrophes) might not send the same signal to policy makers.

From the exogenous elements economic ties or oil imports with the country in which the event happens do not have an effect (H15a and 6a). Among the factors that significantly exercise an effect on the placement of a crisis on the agenda are the two geopolitical considerations. Focusing events in neighbouring countries are much more likely to be attended to, whereas those erupting in strategic partners have a lower chance to appear on the agenda. The first finding is especially important due to the substantial size of its effect. Being a neighbouring country is associated with a 7.54 per cent increase in the probability of a focusing event featuring in the European Council discussions, holding all other variables constant (model 7). Being a strategic partner is related to a reduction in this probability by 1.2 per cent, again holding all other variables constant (model 7). While hypothesis 3a is confirmed, the reversed findings on hypothesis 4a are a bit puzzling at a first glance. The EU seems to care significantly less about crises in strategic partners than in the rest of the world even if the difference is not vast. Yet, there seems to be a logical explanation behind this striking result. Probably the countries with which the EU has formal partnership ties are the ones where relations are well established and can hardly be disturbed by focusing events of unpleasant character. Moreover, spending attention to such events would not have much impact on the bilateral ties anyway and it is therefore more worthy to invest agenda time in urgent matters occurring on territories where there is still something to gain.

Regarding the control variables on institutional agenda constraints, we see that the diversity of the agenda does not play a role in determining whether to respond to focusing events. The annual number of the latter has significant impact on the chance of an individual crisis to be addressed only in some of the models and not in the final one. Thus, increasing the competition between focusing events might lower the chance for an individual event to appear on the agenda but the evidence is not very strong, in particular when focusing event type is controlled for.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Focusing event type (D)	-2.606*** (.253)						-2.302*** (.315)
N killed people		.000 (.000)					.000** (.000)
Neighbouring country (D)			2.09*** (.186)				1.875*** (.247)
Strategic partner (D)				-868*** (.276)			-565* (.335)
External trade volume					-0.000 (.000)		.000 (.000)
Oil-related imports						.000 (.000)	-0.000 (.000)
Agenda diversity	.528 (.373)	.551 (.46)	.437 (.374)	.567 (.361)	.127 (.618)	.179 (.621)	-0.209 (.687)
N focusing events/year	-.004 (.002)	-.006** (.003)	-.008*** (.002)	-.008*** (.002)	-.017*** (.005)	-.019*** (.005)	-.009 (.006)
Constant	-3.316*** (.692)	-4.039*** (.912)	-3.93*** (.721)	-3.607*** (.689)	-1.155 (1.301)	-1.086 (1.313)	-0.961 (1.42)
Observations	5353	3901	5353	5353	4078	4078	3338
Log likelihood	-531.903	-454.83	-562.464	-607.358	-447.998	-449.315	-325.164
Pseudo R2	.141	.014	.092	.019	.031	.028	.234

Notes: D in parentheses designates a dummy variable; robust standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

Table 6.2. Logistic regression on focusing events on the agenda (presence vs. absence)

Table 6.3 presents the second step in the analysis – fractional logits on the subset of the data featuring only those focusing events discussed in the European Council. Since the coefficients in a fractional logic are not very informative, marginal effects are presented. In these models we see that the type of event and amount of human deaths do not influence the level of attention a crisis receives (H1b and 2b). Like in the previous tests we observe country-bound logic but in this case the pattern is slightly different. Focusing events in neighbouring countries are not only more likely to receive attention generally (H3a) but they can also be expected to gain more attention once discussed (H3b). In particular, focusing events occurring in neighbouring countries are associated with an increase in attention of 0.05 percentage points compared to those in countries from the rest of the world (model 7). This effect is quite large and significant at the 0.01 per cent level. Being a strategic partner or having oil trade with the EU does not play a significant role (H4b and 6b). Yet, what we see here is an additional economic ties explanation. Although with a relatively weak power, stronger trade interchange between the EU and a third country seems to go hand in hand with stronger attention to focusing events in that state (H5b). In determining the level of attention to be spent on urgent crises, neither the concentration of the agenda nor the overall number of focusing events seems to matter.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Focusing event type (D)	-.013 (.014)						.007 (.023)
N killed people		.000 (.000)					.000 (.000)
Neighbouring country (D)			.05*** (.018)				.053*** (.015)
Strategic partner (D)				.004 (.027)			-.015 (.024)
External trade volume					.000*** (.000)		.000*** (.000)
Oil-related imports						-.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)
Agenda diversity	.056 (.073)	.095 (.098)	.029 (.06)	.054 (.08)	.098 (.12)	.128 (.123)	.052 (.087)
N focusing events/year	-.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)	-.000 (.001)	-.000 (.001)	.000 (.000)
Predicted mean	.059	.053	.055	.059	.042	.043	.036
Observations	134	101	134	134	98	98	93
Deviance	13.813	10.971	12.504	13.862	8.835	9.53	7.108
Pseudo log likelihood	-24.21	-17.438	-23.555	-24.235	-14.752	-15.1	-13.589

Notes: D in parentheses designates a dummy variable; robust standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

Table 6.3. Marginal effects of fractional logit on attention to focusing events on the agenda (share of attention)

## **Conclusion**

Focusing events play an important role in the policy cycle with their power to disrupt the preferences of the day and reshuffle agendas. Large scale dramatic phenomena are by default triggers for political attention but such crises are in fact not so rare. Therefore, spending attention in policy venues is not a matter of automatic reaction mechanism but involves the element of political choice. Understanding the decision-making logic behind the placement of a focusing event on the agenda and the allocation of a certain level of attention to it has broader implications for the way political institutions function in agenda-setting processes. Starting such an inquiry with the case study of the EU is a tough test for disentangling stable logics of impact, since the EU is a polity in the making. A focus on the European Council is justified as it presents most appropriate venue for immediate reaction in the EU, an institution prone to rhetorical responsiveness.

Combining data from multiple sources, the study conducts the first systematic analysis of determinants of attention to focusing events over a period longer than two decades. The results demonstrate that decisions regarding the overall placement of crises on the EU agenda are not ad-hoc but underscored by a 'neighbourhood attraction'. The closer a country is to the EU geographically the more likely it is events occurring on its territory to elicit some response from the European Council, as well as to receive a higher portion of its attention eventually. It is notable that the need to address catastrophes in strategic partners is rather weak, as crises elsewhere are more likely to make it to the agenda. On the other hand, once a focusing event is addressed, besides the neighbourhood logic an economic ties dimension seems to exercise a positive effect though in a rather weak fashion. Furthermore, the type of event plays a role in granting agenda access, with man-made incidents being more likely to appear as a discussion point than natural disasters. This factor however does not have an impact on the level of attention. The results also suggest that studies which combine various types of focusing events need to come up with a more elaborate measure of magnitude, since the number of people killed in a conflict and a disaster cannot be regarded as the same measure.

The fact that the EU is foremost interested in what is going on in its immediate environment suggests that it is first of all a regional organisation. This finding goes also hand in hand with the fact that widening has always been a core dimension in European integration. The neighbours are important because they might become Union members or at least be part of a more fluid integrationist network, like the European Neighbourhood Policy. But this trait is probably not exceptional to the EU. There are reasons to believe that any polity should activate its immediate reaction mechanisms mostly when a dramatic event is occurring close to its borders, therefore threatening to have some domestic impact as well. The motivation behind spending more attention to focusing events in close neighbours is probably grounded in expectations for internal repercussions.

The finding that the European Council is more likely to address man-made accidents rather than natural disasters corresponds with a prevention logic which has two important considerations. Focusing events happening as a result of guided human action provide learning examples on how to tackle contemporary security challenges. Since such challenges usually have a global implication, this certainly implies domestic effects even if the scope varies. External man-made accidents and catastrophes also present an opportunity for positioning in international affairs, and addressing such matters can be the first step in involvement in a military or peace coalition with long-term implications for the EU's image as an international player.

The recent study has laid the basis for theorising on the logic of responsiveness to focusing events. The distinction between *potential* and *effective* focusing events proves to be important and we cannot anymore proceed with the assumption that any striking sudden occurrence of a large scale will automatically trigger attention. The selection of the venue for responsiveness is crucial for the kind of expectations one can suggest on attention dynamics on focusing events. Further research should test the 'successful ingredients' for allocating attention on such occurrences on other political systems and across venues. It should also concentrate on developing a more fine-grained measure of magnitude. With the creation of new event datasets it might become possible to differentiate further the dichotomous typology of focusing events, yielding useful evidence for the policy making responses beyond the agenda-setting stage.





## 7. Conclusions

The European Council, born outside the EU treaty framework and powerful by the virtue of its own composition, is nowadays an informal agenda setter of the Union. It has been involved in multiple ways in steering the European integration process – taking vital decisions in deadlocked situations, giving birth to new initiatives and regularly monitoring all kinds of developments. This institution has been functioning as a regular meeting arena since 1975, enjoying high level of discretion regarding the issues to be discussed and the intimate benefit of closed-door negotiations. With the approaching date of a new meeting of the European Council the media alertness is increasing and EU affairs analysts start making predictions about the topics which the Heads of State and Government are going to address. Despite the enormous implications of the discussions held at the summits for the overall EU policy-making process, little is known about the dynamics that drive agenda composition within the European Council. Therefore, this dissertation set to provide a systematic analysis of the allocation of attention at the summits and the factors which influence shifts in this attention.

The research first embarked on the task of classifying the nature of the agenda in relation to the institution's standing in the EU policy-making framework, focusing on the magnitude and level of attention changes. The studies then focused on specific aspects which could potentially act as agenda determinants and critically evaluated their role in analyses covering long-term periods. In particular, factors belonging to three broad categories were considered – institutional conditions, external stakeholders' effect and the 'problem stream'. The rich empirical material allowed drawing conclusions regarding the extent to which the various determinants exercise an agenda-setting effect, and in some respects also the conditions under which this happens. Besides offering insightful empirical findings, the five pieces of research contribute to substantiating agenda-setting theory in two ways. They put key

postulates, such as the punctuated equilibrium model, to test in the EU context and conduce to thickening the theoretical basis via proposing complementary elements.

## **Out of the Black Box: Main Findings**

### *Empirical Patterns and Lessons*

Over almost four decades of functioning the European Council has dealt with a multiplicity of issues but the overall attention has been distributed disproportionately. The most visible themes are foreign affairs, macroeconomics and governance<sup>88</sup>, occupying altogether about half of the agenda space. The pattern of attention shifts across topics over time corresponds well with the punctuated equilibrium theory, which predicts relative stability interspersed by substantial changes. But the European Council's issue attention pattern is notable for its even stronger level of high negative change. For this institution it is relatively easy to spend attention to one topic and completely ignore it at the following summit. Almost no policy theme besides the big three is secured from dropping off the agenda. Despite this outstanding feature, the degree of peakedness of the distribution of attention change (kurtosis) is quite similar to this of other process type agendas, such as hearings in the US Congress or coalition agreements in multiparty parliamentary systems. This reflects the twofold position of the European Council in the EU's institution framework. It sets in motion policy input by initiating new programmes and delegating actions to other institutions but at the same time produces policy output when taking crucial decisions or functioning as conflict arbiter.

Considering the nature of attention change over time, the European Council agenda has undergone an evolution in both scope and spread across domains. During the early years of the institution, from the mid-70s till the end of the 80s, the agenda was

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<sup>88</sup> The term governance is used to refer to issues like functioning of government institutions, relationships between the EU, its member states and regions, bureaucratic oversight, regulation of political life, EU treaty reform, modes of decision-making, etc.

gradually becoming more diverse but also displaying a lot of instability between consecutive years. Since the time of negotiating the Maastricht Treaty, the overall trend of increasing fragmentation was preserved although at a slower speed but an additional effect became visible. The period 1991-2010 features three similar oscillating patterns after each other – moving from concentration to diversity and back to concentration. This specific shape is somewhat a reflection of balancing between conflicting forces, such as expansion of areas of involvement and the need to focus on major problems. Yet, even more it seems to be related to the share of attention received by the three core topics on the agenda – foreign affairs, macroeconomics and governance. In the post-1991 period, when the attention to these three themes increased the agenda diversity underwent a reduction, while it expanded at the times of their decline. Lastly, concentration and fragmentation shifts appear to be affected by the total volume of the agenda, with higher diversity visible at moments of contraction of this volume.

Corresponding with the politically elevated position of the institution, attention in the European Council is higher on topics within the scope of core functions of government. This is the underlining issue character type with strongest conditioning power for the distribution of attention. However, a second line of issue character with smaller explanatory value also plays a role, and its degree varies over time. Topics can gain more attention when economic attributes are underlined, making it possible for non-core issues to occupy substantive portions of attention at single meetings when they are wrapped in economic references and implications. Selecting what issue character to emphasise is essentially a political decision in the hands of the participants in the policy process with agenda-setting power acting within the constraints of external influences. Applying this model to the European Council, it is possible to see what factors are responsible for the rises and falls in prominence of the economic character line. During the period 1995-2006, attention allocation was more likely to be affected by an economic dimension when the European Council had predominantly left-wing orientation and the aggregate public deficit figure in the EU was on the rise.

While generally, no specific Head of State or Government can be seen as systematically advantaged when it comes to advocating individual interests on the EU

agenda, the office of the Presidency is often considered a key to such influence. Within the European Council the Presidency was chairing the summits during its half-annual rotating term until the entering into force of the Lisbon Treaty which introduced the post of a permanent President. However, thorough comparative analysis shows lack of any privilege in European Council agenda setting for the Presidency-holder. This conclusion is derived via an examination of issue prioritisation in European Council Conclusions and national executive agendas in five member states: Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom. These five countries constitute a representative sample of the whole population of EU member state in terms of size and geography (at least until the big enlargement). Yet, none of them was more powerful in lining up the European agenda with its national one when running the Presidency compared to the times when it was just a 'simple' member. Thus, while the overall agenda of the European Council might be a battle field where each member state tries to push for its own preferred issues, the office of the Presidency does not provide an institutional advantage in this respect.

The European Council is located at the top of the political hierarchy in the EU, a position quite distant from ordinary citizens, which at a first glance suggests one should not expect any direct interaction between the two to occur. Yet, because of its visibility and discretion in addressing issues the European Council might have both the motivation and the ability to respond to the public's concerns. In fact it can do so in a rhetorical way, by giving more attention to the topics which the citizens consider to be important at a given moment. The analysis of the relationship between the agendas of the European top and the EU public on ten different policy fields shows differentiated responsiveness – present only in some issue areas. The size of attention in the European Council on crime, economics, environment, and immigration is predicted well by the issue prominence on the citizen's most important problem list. But on the topics education, employment, health, inflation, taxation and terrorism no relationship exists. The responsiveness pattern does not reflect traditional domains within European Council discussions, and more research is necessary to disentangle the logic behind the existing differentiated responsiveness. Yet, jurisdictional competencies seem to play at least a partial role especially if the level of

responsiveness is considered. On environmental matters where the EU has higher level of jurisdictions and stronger policy involvement the European Council is following public concerns more than on crime, economics, and immigration.

The agenda of the EU top is often shaken by focusing events. The empirical investigation of this long-ago-suggested claim shows that ten per cent of the contents in the Conclusions are associated with a focusing event. But while the European Council has spent portions of attention to various sudden striking occurrences, it has by no means addressed all events which could potentially be considered ‘focusing’ over the last almost 40 years. The EU leaders have been setting in force selection mechanisms on the basis of characteristics of the crisis situation and the relationship between the EU and the event’s geographic locus. Focusing events have a higher chance to appear on the agenda when they are man-made (i.e. not natural). They are also more likely to be discussed when taking place in a neighbouring country or region. The number of casualties plays a role but its impact is not straightforward, and probably depends on the type of event. Once an item is on the agenda the factors which influence how much it will be discussed are slightly different. Focusing events happening in countries in the neighbourhood are more prominent also in attention levels, but stronger economic ties between the country of origin and the EU affect the attention size positively as well.

In short, the European Council shows disproportionate information processing of policy issues resulting in a punctuated pattern of attention change. Considering the three groups of categories of agenda determinants – institutional conditions, external stakeholders’ effect and the ‘problem stream’ – it seems that each of them can have an effect depending on various conditions. Institutional role expectations predict the predisposition of the European Council towards core themes of government. The institutional context however, in the face of the Presidency, does not add to the leverage of individual member states in advocating domestic preferences. The public is not an ignored external stakeholder despite of its distance but citizens’ concerns are addresses only selectively. The problem stream is clearly putting pressure on the Heads of State and Government to react. Rising negative indicators, such as public deficit, can urge the EU leaders to put an emphasis on economic character in various

domains. Last, focusing events with specific characteristics can upset the agenda, via adding new issues which demand attention.

### ***Theoretical Contributions***

One of the major advances of agenda-setting theory undertaken with the research in this dissertation is the application of the punctuated equilibrium model to the European Council. John called the EU ‘the toughest test for the Policy Agendas Project’ (2006: 982) but the first systematic examination of the agenda of a core EU institution with the toolbox of this project demonstrates that the Union is functioning as an ordinary political system. As any other political institution, the European Council has to cope with the problem of bounded rationality and make sacrifices of some topics while rewarding others at its summits. The fact that the nature of attention change in this institution is similar to other process agendas, such as for example parliamentary interpellations in Denmark and Belgium or Hearings in the US Congress (Baumgartner et al., 2009), confirms once again that there is systematic logic regarding the level of friction across types of policy agendas. This logic pertains to the EU system as well.

The research on shifts in attention focusing on the temporal aspect of such dynamics contributes to substantiating the punctuated equilibrium model further. Relying on the measure of entropy as an indicator of the agenda diversity (John & Jennings, 2010), it is possible to classify periods of attention evolution in terms of scope and dispersion. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the European Council experiences a volatile pattern of agenda diversity with an upward trend. This suggests that it is still finding its place in the institutional architecture but also gradually expanding its remit of activity. Since the early 1990s a trice repeated stable oscillatory patterns is visible starting with stepwise expansion of diversity followed by a stepwise contraction. This continuous rebalancing of attention dispersion over a few years period is a reflection of rises and falls in prominence of the three core issues – foreign affairs, macroeconomics and governance. This particular conditional effect plays a role in other agendas (Jennings

et al., 2011), suggesting once again that similarity between agendas is related to the position in the institutional hierarchy and not to systemic factors.

The contraposition of core themes of governance and the remaining topics is quite strong for the European Council. However, it is not the only determining line of attention distribution. The research in this dissertation proposed a novel model on explaining agenda setting via the notion of issue character. The emphasising of a specific issue character line by political actors has direct impact on the allocation of attention. In the European Council, besides the core themes logic an economic load also conditions the relative presence of topics on the agenda. Thus, issue character can be used as an intermediary step for predicting the overall allocation of political attention via a range of other theoretically derived factors. These factors can be related to both the participants in the policy process and the context around them. The study of the economic issue character line in the European Council demonstrates that in practice both types of elements influence the uplifting of its prominence. The two-stage model of predicting attention allocation can be applied to any political agenda. It offers a new approach able to account for the problem of ignorance of issue competition and bounded rationality in studies focused on attention determinants for a specific policy domain.

Another theoretical advancement is reflected in the examination of the term rhetorical responsiveness (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008). This concept introduced a few years ago adds to the literature of political responsiveness by emphasising that reacting to public demands is not only associated with effective policy outputs but also with general discussions and considerations. In short, the allocation of political attention is also a sort of responsiveness, the most appropriate way for some institutions to react. Considering the politically elevated but to some extent also symbolic role of European Council Conclusions and the general formal lack of legislative functions of this institution, it appears as a perfect target for rhetorical responsiveness. Doing the first of this kind study on the EU level demonstrates the relevance of using this concept. The findings of differentiated level of responsiveness show the need of further theorising on the logic behind such selective or biased reactivity.

The last study in the dissertation makes first steps into building of a systematic theory of attention to focusing events. The notion that sudden striking occurrences can overturn agendas is old but the conditions under which this in fact happens have not been systematically explored. Two types of factors could influence the likelihood of potential focusing events to materialise in effective ones considered from the respective of the venue that exhibits a reaction – exogenous and endogenous ones. Exogenous characteristics are those directly stemming from the nature of the event, such as magnitude or type. Endogenous characteristics reflect a relationship between the agenda-setting venue and the locus of the occurrence. For example, political or economic relations between states or certain interdependencies belong to this group. Endogenous features can also relate to the nature of the agenda, most notably to its capacity to incorporate additional issues. The study on the European Council demonstrates that different specific factors within both categories have determined the placement of focusing events on the European Council agenda and the level of attention they receive.

In short, the dissertation has offered an application of existing theoretical standpoints to the EU context, which in some respects can be considered challenging. In particular, the punctuated equilibrium theory was applied to the European Council, successfully explaining shifts in attention, with further exploration of temporal dynamics and their underlying reasoning. Moreover, the concept of rhetorical responsiveness was utilised in the EU multi-level system, with mixed results requiring further theorising on the logic behind differentiated responsiveness. The studies in this dissertation also make first steps towards theory building by proposing a two-stage model for disentangling the composition of complete agendas over long time periods. Last but not least, delving into the logic of responding to focusing events delivers arguments on which a substantive theory of reactivity to such occurrences can be grounded.



## Implications for Further Research

### *The European Council as a Policy Venue*

The Presidency Conclusions issued after almost every summit are a rich source of the attention to policy issues. The results of the first study show that these Conclusions are very similar to the executive speeches in nation states both in terms of overall composition and the nature of attention change. This suggests that the *de facto* role of the European Council in the EU's institutional framework is much closer to that of a top executive than one might wish to admit. Calling this institution the government of the EU might sound exaggerated considering its absence in the official decision-making procedures and the informality with which it can impose decisions. Yet, its output and information processing manner hint at a functional layer of government in EU politics, confirming the claim of legal scholars and practitioners that this institution is a key locus of executive power in the Union (e.g. Curtin, 2009; Peeperkorn, 2013). Therefore, further research needs to reconsider the role of the European Council in EU agenda setting and place a stronger emphasis on its Conclusions in studies of EU agenda formation. A step in this direction has been undertaken recently in an attempt to relate the topical output of the summits to the EU's decision-making modes (Puetter, 2013).

A step beyond the scope of attention evolution is an analysis incorporating state positions and attitudes. While this will be impossible to disentangle on the basis of the Conclusions solely, in-depth interviews can shed more light on the dynamics behind the bargaining process at the summits (as Puetter's 2013 study demonstrates). With gradual opening of access to classified archival data, confidential records from the meetings or their preparatory stages can be explored as additional evidence.<sup>89</sup> The acquisition of this type of data could allow for more systematic analysis of important decisions and attempts for placing issues on the agenda. The position and preferences derived from declassified historical archives could be combined with the existing

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<sup>89</sup> For example, the UK has declassified such records older than 30 years. They are electronically available at: <http://www.margarethatcher.org/archive>

dataset on European Council Conclusions to answer a range of relevant research questions. It will be possible, for example, to analyse the role of specific state leaders in promoting policy initiatives, or to determine why certain issues have failed to appear in the final version of the Conclusions.

Existing research provides evidence for no permanent groupings among the Heads of State and Government that could dominate the agenda in a longitudinal perspective (Tallberg, 2008a). This dissertation demonstrated that the institutionally elevated office of the Presidency does not offer a long-term de facto advantage for any member state either. Both findings suggest that national preferences, even if they are fiercely defended, are placed on the negotiation table in the context of many constraints. Some of them stem from the environment which calls for reaction – signals coming in the form of a financial crisis, a devastating earthquake or citizens' public disagreement with a policy course. But other constraints are subject to behavioural powers within the institution's framework. The information processing capacity of state leaders sitting together in the European Council is limited, and scheduling an additional number of meetings has only narrowly extended this leeway. More research needs to be done on the manner in which information is processed beyond the formula of punctuated equilibrium. Recent attempts in this direction try to zoom in the leptokurtic distribution of attention change in order to understand its longitudinal development (Alexandrova, Carammia, & Timmermans, 2014) or suggest a delicate balance between 'routine monitoring' and 'selective targeting' regarding the European Council's mode of work (Carammia, Princen, & Timmermans, 2013). Building on the insights from these studies, and conducting additional systematic analyses will eventually allow us to grasp the nature and role of behavioural constraints in agenda setting at the EU top.

### *Disentangling the EU Policy-Making Process*

The studies in this dissertation reveal that the European Council is a crucial policy venue in the EU with wide ranging functions – from responding to focusing events to

addressing citizens' concerns. Their results underline the importance of considering this institution in research on EU policy making alongside the Commission, the Council and the Parliament. The European Council's monitoring of various developments, including crises and rising negative indicators, results in swift attention shifts. Being the gatekeeper of the 'high politics' route (Princen & Rhinard, 2006), these reactions can go further and materialise in policy initiatives which the Commission takes up. The extent to which ideas originating with the European Council are reworked into specific proposals is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Recent research testifies that this relationship might be quite powerful with the European Council pulling the strains (Eggermont, 2012). Therefore, systematic analysis of the de facto involvement of the European Council in legislative initiative and decision making is necessary if we want to grasp how these processes actually work in the EU.

Besides research on inter-institutional relationships, policy area studies on the EU should incorporate the European Council in their scope of analysis. The wide variety of issues the Heads of State and Government have addressed or induced cooperation in is a sufficiently compelling reason. A recent study on the EU's energy agenda demonstrates that we cannot analyse the developments in this area without considering the multifaceted involvement of the European Council. It was the driver for building new initiatives, such as 'Energy Policy for Europe', deliberated and made key choices in reaction to focusing events like the second oil crisis, and materialised issue linkages, such as incorporating energy security in the EU's external relations (Alexandrova & Timmermans, forthcoming). While it is an old wisdom that the European Council is the body responsible for history-making decisions, in particular via treaty change, its significant impact on day-to-day agenda shaping and policy modelling also becomes to get recognised. Therefore, research on EU issue portrayal and competition needs to place a stronger emphasis on the role of the European Council in its scientific enquiries.

The findings on determinants of the European Council agenda also pose questions to the nature and direction of European integration. The discovered rhetorical responsiveness, even if it is only on a few sectors, gives some hope for denouncing the

democratic deficit thesis. But we need similar cross-sectional studies to analyse the scope and level of effective responsiveness since existing research focuses only on overall support for EU integration (e.g. Toshkov, 2011) and ignores public preferences on specific issues. Acquiring such knowledge is crucial for juxtaposing reality against popular myths about the vices of the Union. Another major question indirectly touched by the research in this dissertation concerns the power and position of the EU in the global order. The analysis of conditions under which focusing events materialise on the agenda presents a neighbourhood bias. The European Council is more likely both to react and pay more attention to striking events in the world if they occur next door. While this is probably a logical supervisory mechanism towards one's own backyard, it might also point out that the EU is still only a regional organisation rather than a global player. Such a proposition clearly requires theoretically underpinned analysis in order to reconcile the self-perceptions and aspirations of the Union with the empirical reality.

### ***Construction of Policy Agendas in Political Institutions***

The studies on the European Council demonstrate that the building of a political agenda is a process in which multiple factors exercise influence at the same time. Constructing a single model which can incorporate all is hardly possible due to the different foci (e.g. micro vs. macro policy level) and the variety in which available data can be measured. Yet, separate systematic analyses of different agenda-setting determinants yield evidence for the extent to which specific variables matter and the conditions under which they can become crucial. While such an approach has its shortcomings, in particular the low chance to find jointly working effects or such that may cancel each other, overall it provides more parsimonious and straightforward explanations. Therefore, conducting separate analyses on specific factors is still the most suitable way to move such research forward.

One direction in which the study of policy agendas can progress is comparative enquiries across polities. The research on the European Council has demonstrated

that an institution which at a first glance appears unique shares a lot of similarities with other venues in nation states (see also Baumgartner et al., 2009). Expanding the investigations offered in some of the studies in this dissertation towards other comparable contexts could help build stronger theories of agenda formation. For example, the idea of focusing events as powerful drivers in reshuffling attention in policy venues is quite well-known. But so far there have been no studies trying to unfold a systematic logic behind spending attention to such events. The analysis of the European Council demonstrated that there are both endogenous and exogenous factors which underscore the reaction mechanism. Expanding research towards other political institutions can provide insights into the similarities and differences in engaging with such unexpected information. Analysing the determinants of attention across different types of venues – executives, legislatives, media, the public, etc. – can enlighten us also on the systemic variation in reactivity.

Another possible direction for research building up on the findings of this dissertation is the incorporation of the two-step agenda-setting model into various studies of overall agenda composition. Using data reduction techniques on policy agendas datasets will enable scholars to disentangle dominant types of issue character and their relative emphasis over time. This finding can then serve as the basis for testing theoretically derived hypotheses on determinants of the overall allocation of attention. Such analyses lack the detailed focus of case studies on specific policy areas but more importantly they do not share the pitfalls of case-study research – its limited scope and impossibility to account for cross-domain issue competition. Employing the two-stage agenda-setting model permits to draw conclusions on the factors which influence the overall shifts in issue character emphasis, and therewith thematic loadings of policy talk regarding particular issues.

A single dissertation is only a drop in the sea of knowledge. But it also lays a foundation on which others to build and delve further. This dissertation offered fresh insights into the functioning of a powerful institution, which for over almost forty years has regularly guided the moves of the most successful experiment in international cooperation thus far, the EU, which nowadays functions as an ordinary political system. It also presented new evidence about the initial and crucial stage in

the policy-making process – agenda setting – and the variety of factors which influence attention to issues by political actors. The findings have far-reaching implication for research and practice. They can be expanded into a number of directions to provide answers to pressing questions of politics and policy in today's world.

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## 9. Annexes

### Annex 1: The European Council in the EC/ EU Treaties

Treaty Year signed/ in force	Main provisions related to the European Council and changes in them
<b>Single European Act (SEA)</b> 1986/ 1987	<b>Title I Common Provisions, Article 2</b> The European Council shall bring together the Heads of State or of Government of the Member States and the President of the Commission of the European Communities. They shall be assisted by the Ministers for Foreign Affairs and by a Member of the Commission. The European Council shall meet at least twice a year.
<b>Maastricht Treaty</b> 1992/ 1993	<b>Title I Common Provisions, Article D</b> The European Council shall provide the Union with the necessary impetus for its development and shall define the general political guidelines thereof. The European Council shall bring together the Heads of State or of Government of the Member States and the President of the Commission. They shall be assisted by the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of the Member States and by a Member of the Commission. The European Council shall meet at least twice a year, under the chairmanship of the Head of State or of Government of the Member State which holds the Presidency of the Council. The European Council shall submit to the European Parliament a report after each of its meetings and a yearly written report on the progress achieved by the Union.
<b>Amsterdam Treaty</b> 1997/ 1999	<b>Title I Common Provisions, Article 4</b> – the same as Article D, TEU
<b>Treaty of Nice</b> 2001/ 2003	No changes to Art. 4, Treaty of Amsterdam <b>Declaration on the venue for European Councils</b> As from 2002, one European Council meeting per Presidency will be held in Brussels. When the Union comprises 18 members, all European Council meetings will be held in Brussels.
<b>Lisbon Treaty</b>	<b>Article 9</b> – The European Council listed among the EU institutions <b>Title III Provisions on the Institutions, Article 9B</b> (replaces Art. 4,

2007/ 2009	<p>Treaty of Amsterdam)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The European Council shall provide the Union with the necessary impetus for its development and shall define the general political directions and priorities thereof. It shall not exercise legislative functions.</li> <li>2. The European Council shall consist of the Heads of State or Government of the Member States, together with its President and the President of the Commission. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy shall take part in its work.</li> <li>3. The European Council shall meet twice every six months, convened by its President. When the agenda so requires, the members of the European Council may decide each to be assisted by a minister and, in the case of the President of the Commission, by a member of the Commission. When the situation so requires, the President shall convene a special meeting of the European Council.</li> <li>4. Except where the Treaties provide otherwise, decisions of the European Council shall be taken by consensus.</li> <li>5. The European Council shall elect its President, by a qualified majority, for a term of two and a half years, renewable once. In the event of an impediment or serious misconduct, the European Council can end the President's term of office in accordance with the same procedure.</li> <li>6. The President of the European Council: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) shall chair it and drive forward its work;</li> <li>(b) shall ensure the preparation and continuity of the work of the European Council in cooperation with the President of the Commission, and on the basis of the work of the General Affairs Council;</li> <li>(c) shall endeavour to facilitate cohesion and consensus within the European Council;</li> <li>(d) shall present a report to the European Parliament after each of the meetings of the European Council.</li> </ol> </li> </ol> <p>The President of the European Council shall, at his level and in that capacity, ensure the external representation of the Union on issues concerning its common foreign and security policy, without prejudice to the powers of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.</p> <p>The President of the European Council shall not hold a national office.</p>
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Annex 2: European Council Meetings and Conclusions, 1975–2012

Year (term)	Nr Meetings	Meeting Date 1	Meeting Date 2	Meeting Date 3	Meeting Date 4	Nr Conclusions	Meeting Place	Presidency/ President
1975 (1)	1	11-3-1975				1	Dublin	Ireland
1975 (2)	2	17-7-1975	2-12-1975			2	Brussels/ Rome	Italy
1976 (1)	1	2-4-1976				1	Luxembourg	Luxembourg
1976 (2)	2	13-7-1976	30-11-1976			2	Brussels/ The Hague	Netherlands
1977 (1)	2	26-3-1977	30-6-1977			2	Rome/ London	United Kingdom
1977 (2)	1	6-12-1977				1	Brussels	Belgium
1978 (1)	1	8-4-1978				1	Copenhagen	Denmark
1978 (2)	2	7-7-1978	5-12-1978			2	Bremen/ Brussels	Germany
1979 (1)	2	13-3-1979	22-6-1979			2	Paris/ Strasbourg	France
1979 (2)	1	30-11-1979				1	Dublin	Ireland
1980 (1)	2	28-4-1980	12-6-1980			2	Luxembourg/ Venice	Italy
1980 (2)	1	2-12-1980				1	Luxembourg	Luxembourg
1981 (1)	2	24-3-1981	30-6-1981			2	Maastricht/ Luxembourg	Netherlands
1981 (2)	1	27-11-1981				1	London	United Kingdom
1982 (1)	2	30-3-1982	29-6-1982			2	Brussels/ Brussels	Belgium
1982 (2)	1	4-12-1982				1	Copenhagen	Denmark

1983 (1)	2	22-3-1983	19-6-1983				2	Brussels/ Stuttgart	Germany
1983 (2)	1	6-12-1983					0	Athens	Greece
1984 (1)	2	20-3-1984	26-6-1984				2	Brussels/ Fontainebleau	France
1984 (2)	1	4-12-1984					1	Dublin	Ireland
1985 (1)	2	30-3-1985	29-6-1985				2	Brussels/ Milan	Italy
1985 (2)	1	3-12-1985					1	Luxembourg	Luxembourg
1986 (1)	1	26-6-1986					1	The Hague	Netherlands
1986 (2)	1	6-12-1986					1	London	United Kingdom
1987 (1)	1	30-6-1987					1	Brussels	Belgium
1987 (2)	1	5-12-1987					0	Copenhagen	Denmark
1988 (1)	2	13-2-1988	28-6-1988				2	Brussels/ Hanover	Germany
1988 (2)	1	3-12-1988					1	Rhodes	Greece
1989 (1)	1	27-6-1989					1	Madrid	Spain
1989 (2)	2	18-11-1989	9-12-1989				1	Paris/ Strasbourg	France
1990 (1)	2	28-4-1990	26-6-1990				2	Dublin/ Dublin	Ireland
1990 (2)	2	28-10-1990	15-12-1990				2	Rome/ Rome	Italy
1991 (1)	2	8-4-1991	29-6-1991				1	Luxembourg	Luxembourg
1991 (2)	2	11-12-1991					1	Maastricht	Netherlands

1992 (1)	1	27-6-1992					1	Lisbon	Portugal
1992 (2)	2	16-10-1992	13-12-1992				2	Birmingham/ Edinburgh	United Kingdom
1993 (1)	1	22-6-1993					1	Copenhagen	Denmark
1993 (2)	2	29-10-1993	11-12-1993				2	Brussels/ Brussels	Belgium
1994 (1)	1	25-6-1994					1	Corfu	Greece
1994 (2)	2	<u>15-7-1994</u>	10-12-1994				1	Brussels/ Essen	Germany
1995 (1)	2	<u>9-6-1995</u>	27-6-1995				1	Paris/ Cannes	France
1995 (2)	2	<u>23-9-1995</u>	16-12-1995				1	Mallorca/ Madrid	Spain
1996 (1)	2	29-3-1996	22-6-1996				2	Turin/ Florence	Italy
1996 (2)	2	<u>5-10-1996</u>	14-12-1996				1	Dublin/ Dublin	Ireland
1997 (1)	2	<u>23-5-1997</u>	17-6-1997				1	Noordwijk/ Amsterdam	Netherlands
1997 (2)	2	<u>21-11-1997</u>	13-12-1997				2	Luxembourg/ Luxembourg	Luxembourg
1998 (1)	2	<u>3-5-1998</u>	16-6-1998				1	Brussels/ Cardiff	United Kingdom
1998 (2)	2	<u>25-10-1998</u>	12-12-1998				1	Pörtlach/ Vienna	Austria
1999 (1)	4	<u>26-2-1999</u>	25-3-1999	<u>14-4-1999</u>	4-6-1999		2	Petersberg/ Berlin/ Brussels/ Cologne	Germany
1999 (2)	2	16-10-1999	11-12-1999				2	Tampere/ Helsinki	Finland
2000 (1)	2	24-3-2000	20-6-2000				2	Lisbon/ Feira (Porto)	Portugal
2000 (2)	2	<u>14-10-2000</u>	9-12-2000				1	Biarritz/ Nice	France

2001 (1)	2	24-3-2001	16-6-2001				2	Stockholm/ Göteborg	Sweden
2001 (2)	3	<i>21-9-2001</i>	19-10-2001	15-12-2001			3	Brussels/ Ghent/ Laeken (Brussels)	Belgium
2002 (1)	2	16-3-2002	22-6-2002				2	Barcelona/ Seville	Spain
2002 (2)	2	25-10-2002	13-12-2002				2	Brussels/ Copenhagen	Denmark
2003 (1)	4	<i>17-2-2003</i>	21-3-2003	<u>16-4-2003</u>	20-6-2003		3	Brussels/ Brussels/ Athens/ Thessaloniki	Greece
2003 (2)	3	17-10-2003	12-12-2003				2	Rome/ Brussels	Italy
2004 (1)	4	26-3-2004	<u>1-5-2004</u>	18-6-2004	<u>29-6-2004</u>		2	Brussels/ Dublin/ Brussels/ Brussels	Ireland
2004 (2)	3	<u>29-10-2004</u>	5-11-2004	17-12-2004			2	Rome/ Brussels/ Brussels	Netherlands
2005 (1)	2	23-3-2005	17-6-2005				2	Brussels/ Brussels	Luxembourg
2005 (2)	2	<u>27-10-2005</u>	16-12-2005				1	Hampton Court/ Brussels	United Kingdom
2006 (1)	2	24-3-2006	16-6-2006				2	Brussels/ Brussels	Austria
2006 (2)	2	<u>20-10-2006</u>	15-12-2006				1	Lahti/ Brussels	Finland
2007 (1)	3	9-3-2007	<u>25-3-2007</u>	22-6-2007			2	Brussels/ Berlin/ Brussels	Germany
2007 (2)	2	<u>19-10-2007</u>	14-12-2007				1	Brussels/ Lisbon/ Brussels	Portugal
2008 (1)	2	14-3-2008	20-6-2008				2	Brussels/ Brussels	Slovenia
2008 (2)	3	<i>1-9-2008</i>	16-10-2008	12-12-2008			3	Brussels/ Brussels/ Brussels	France

2009 (1)	2	20-3-2009	19-6-2009			2	Brussels/ Brussels	Czech Republic
2009 (2)	4	<u>17-9-2009</u>	30-10-2009	<u>19-11-2009</u>	11-12-2009	3	Brussels/ Brussels/ Brussels/ Brussels	Sweden
2010 (1)	4	<u>11-2-2010</u>	26-3-2010	17-6-2010		2	Brussels/ Brussels/ Brussels/ Brussels	Herman van Pompuy (semi- permanent President since 1st December 2009)
2010 (2)	3	16-9-2010	29-10-2010	17-12-2010		3	Brussels/ Brussels/ Brussels	
2011 (1)	4	4-2-2011	<i>11-3-2011</i>	25-3-2011	24-6-2011	4	Brussels/ Brussels/ Brussels/ Brussels	
2011 (2)	3	23-10-2011	<u>26-10-2011</u>	9-12-2011		3	Brussels/ Brussels/ Brussels	
2012 (1)	4	<u>30-1-2012</u>	2-3-2012	<u>23-5-2012</u>	29-6-2012	3	Brussels/ Brussels/ Brussels/ Brussels	
2012 (2)	3	19-10-2012	<i>23-11-2012</i>	14-12-2012		3	Brussels/ Brussels/ Brussels	

Notes: Box in grey = no Conclusions issued; Underlined date = informal meeting; Date in italics = extraordinary meeting.

### **Annex 3: Dataset of Policy-Content-Coded European Council Conclusions**

The European Council Conclusions dataset was developed within the framework of the Comparative Agendas Project. This project started in the early 1990s with the work of Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones on the US (cf. also Baumgartner, Jones, & MacLeod, 1998; Baumgartner & Jones, 2005). The international collaboration network built over the years<sup>90</sup> is united around a shared notion about the way policy venues process issues and uses a common instrument for detecting attention patterns in such venues. In particular, the approach consists of measuring attention to policy issues via classifying the occurrence of these issues in texts on the basis of a detailed typology of policy fields. This process is conducted via a common codebook with most features of it shared by the Policy Agendas community, but also adjusted to national differences in each of the individual projects, including the EU.

Over the course of 2010-2011 (with an update in 2013) two teams of researchers and student assistants at Catania and The Hague conducted content coding of the European Council Conclusions. The work started by collecting all issued Conclusions (some of which were then not publicly available) and recording some basic data about them and their context. In particular, the following elements were traced: the date of the meeting, the year, the location, the member state holding the Presidency (relevant until the introduction of a permanent president in December 2009), the consecutive number of the Presidency (again, until 2009), and the type of meeting (three separate variables indicate whether the summit was informal, extraordinary, and Council meeting at the level of Heads of State and Government). Then, the coding could begin. It involved two steps – identifying measurement units and applying policy agendas codes. The measurement unit chosen for the project was quasi-sentence – the lowest possible entity with policy content. This labour-intensive approach was necessary in order to reflect as closely as possible the true allocation of attention, since the Conclusions cover a multiplicity of issues and even single paragraphs usually

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<sup>90</sup> See [www.comparativeagendas.info](http://www.comparativeagendas.info) for an overview of the various projects within the network.

contain several topics. The method is similar to the approach taken in the Comparative Manifestos Project (Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 1994). The second step in the coding processes consisted of assigning codes from the EU policy agendas codebook.

The main variable in the dataset records policy content. The policy agendas topic codes consist of two levels: major topics, which cover broad policy areas, and subtopics, which indicate specific issues within those areas. The EU codebook (version 3.2 of October 2013) contains 21 major topics and 250 subtopics.<sup>91</sup> Within each major topic the first subtopic covers general matters in that category and all the remaining ones correspond to specific matters. For example, the topic environment has as a first subtopic ‘environment – general’ followed by other subtopics as waste disposal, land and water conservation, air and noise pollution, etc. This two-level coding offers a standard aggregation of policy issues within broader themes but also allows for specific aggregations depending on the research question. Three additional dummy variables trace cross-cutting policy issues, namely foreign policy, cohesion and structural policy, and enlargement. For example, administrative reform and good governance in Afghanistan would be coded with the respective issue code for bureaucratic oversight and government efficiency under the major topic governance but it will also be assigned the foreign policy dummy. This allows for further restructuring of the dataset for specific purposes. Furthermore, the coding also identifies references to countries within and outside of the EU with two variables – an international country code (which also includes international organisations) and an EU Member State code. In the above mentioned example the respective code for Afghanistan would be assigned. Last but not least, the full text of the Conclusions is preserved, easily allowing extensions of the dataset in the future. A variable indicates which quasi-sentences belong to the main text and which are part of the annexes to the Conclusions.

After extensive checking, in December 2013 the full dataset was released for non-commercial public use. It consists of 44755 quasi-sentences, in 43561 of which policy

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<sup>91</sup> Available at: [www.policyagendas.eu/codebook](http://www.policyagendas.eu/codebook)

content has been identified. The most frequently occurring subtopics are some of the general categories – foreign policy, macroeconomics, employment, defence, and governance, whereas 47 topics have been used less than 10 times each. Among the most often coded specific issues are government budget and debt, monetary policy, international economic development, treaty reform, and Common Market. This diversity becomes even more pronounced when differences in attention over time are considered.

All five chapters in this dissertation make use of the dataset in substantial terms. It is either the only data source (chapters 2 and 3) or one of the main databases (chapters 4, 5 and 6). A general overview of the relative size of the main topics on the agenda is presented in the second chapter of this dissertation.<sup>92</sup> This study covers the period 1975-2010 only as the last two years of coding were still under development at the time of writing (and article publication). The chapter relies exclusively on the compiled dataset and applies the measures of kurtosis and entropy to on the major topic level. It aggregates the Conclusions annually in order to make comparisons with existing studies in different contexts easier.

The third chapter also focuses on the major topic level but proposes a half-annual aggregation, as this was the most appropriate planning structure for the European Council until the Treaty of Lisbon. The full dataset is subjected to data reduction techniques (multidimensional scaling) with the aim to disentangle the main dimensions of the agenda and explore their development over time. In the last stage additional data sources are included in order to predict the temporal evolution of one of the discovered dimensions.

The remaining three chapters use the Conclusions in combination with other data. They also extract only a part of the European Council dataset. Chapter four analyses the role of the Presidency in agenda setting by focusing on the domestic agendas of five EU member states. For this purpose the Conclusions are integrated with data on executive speeches content-coded within the Comparative Agendas Project. Hence,

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<sup>92</sup> Other general representations are published in Alexandrova, Carammia, and Timmermans (2014) and Alexandrova et al. (2014).



only 25 half-annual terms are considered in the analysis – those in which one of the selected five countries was in charge of the EU Presidency.

Chapter five connects the Conclusions to data on EU-level public opinion in terms of the so-called 'most important problem' question. This question offers respondents a list of issues out of which they can indicate up to two matters as the most important for them at the moment of the survey. The list is limited, and 10 matches of questionnaire issues could be made to those in the codebook (single codes or a combination of a few codes). The data for relative attention on these 10 policy areas was extracted from the Conclusions dataset. The aggregation was again half-annual and the period used was 2003–2012 due to the shorter existence of the public opinion measure.

Chapter six combines the European Council attention with data on potential focusing events from three different sources. The study does not use the compiled dataset to its full scope, but only as a basis for further development. In particular, after a review of the text of all Conclusions, focusing events on the agenda were identified. The presence or absence of these occurrences was then coded in the new dataset of potential focusing events. Furthermore, the attention spent to each occurrence was recorded in relative terms to the other issues on the agenda. This calculation was possible because of the quasi-sentences level division of the European Council dataset. The policy topic codes allowed drawing a short descriptive overview of the policy areas with which the effective focusing were associated.



## 10. Samenvatting

Toen de Libische Revolutie in februari 2011 uitbrak, riep de Europese Raad een bijzondere vergadering bijeen om de steun van de EU te betuigen aan het Libische democratiseringsproces. Toen tijdens de recente economische crisis de jeugdwerkloosheidscijfers dramatisch toe begonnen te nemen, besteedde de Europese Raad in de loop van 2012 extra aandacht aan dit onderwerp culminerend in het Jeugdwerkgelegenheidsinitiatief in februari 2013. In het proces tot de oprichting van de interne EU-energiemarkt, bekrachtigde de Europese Raad in 2005 eerst de behoefte aan een dergelijk project. Sindsdien stond het frequent op de agenda. In bijeenkomsten gaf De Europese Raad commentaar op rapporten van de Europese Commissie, verzocht hij lidstaten om nieuwe richtlijnen te implementeren, en bevestigde hij de uiterste termijn voor de voltooiing van de gemeenschappelijke energiemarkt. Dit zijn enkele voorbeelden waaruit blijkt dat de Europese Raad zijn stempel heeft gedrukt op bijna elke kwestie die in het EU-beleidsproces in omloop was, waarbij hij de agenda van de Unie heeft bepaald en belangrijke besluiten over de koers van verdere integratie heeft genomen.

Het is daarom niet verassend dat de Europese Raad is benoemd tot “motor” (Johnston, 1994: 145) van de Unie, zijn “hoogste politiek instantie” (Westlake & Galloway, 2004: 171) en “een plaats van macht zoals geen ander ... in het EU institutionele stelsel vandaag” (Hayes-Renshaw & Wallace, 2006: 165). De Europese Raad bestaat uit de staatshoofden en regeringsleiders van alle EU-lidstaten en sinds december 2009 voorgezeten door een permanente voorzitter. De voorzitter van de Commissie woont de vergaderingen bij. Zij komen sinds maart 1975 regelmatig samen om “de noodzakelijke impulsen voor de ontwikkeling van de Unie” te geven en “de algemene politieke beleidslijnen” vast te stellen (Verdrag van Maastricht). Hoewel de aanname van waarnemers dat de EU-toppen de “regering van Europa” vormen (Peter Ludlow, in Peeperkorn, 2013; see also Werts, 2008) wellicht nog wat overdreven is, zijn veel wetenschappers het erover eens dat de Europese Raad als “samenhang van

Europees politiek bestuur“ zou moeten worden bestudeerd (Foret & Rittelmeyer, 2014: 2).

Dankzij de wijze van haar samenstelling heeft de instelling altijd relatief veel vrijheid gehad in de selectie van onderwerpen voor bespreking en in de allocatie van aandacht. Ondanks deze relatieve keuzevrijheid zijn er verschillende factoren die direct of indirect de definitieve samenstelling van de agenda beïnvloeden. Ons begrip van de processen die aan dergelijke beleidsdynamica ten grondslag liggen zijn erg beperkt. Dit proefschrift behandelt de vraag welke factoren de agenda van de Europese Raad beïnvloeden, door de aard van verschuivingen van aandacht in deze instelling te analyseren en determinanten van de structuur en omvang van de agenda te onderzoeken. Het antwoord op deze vraag heeft implicaties voor zowel studies over het politieke stelsel van de EU en zijn beleidsoutput, als voor de literatuur over prioriteitenstelling van kwesties en politieke aandacht.

De beleidsagenda is een concept dat de „verzameling van kwesties die onderhevig zijn aan besluitvorming en debat binnen een bepaald politiek systeem op een gegeven moment“ aanduidt (Baumgartner, 2001: 288). De politieke agenda vaststellen verwijst dus naar de allocatie van aandacht over verschillende beleidsonderwerpen, waarbij het zowel om de selectie als om de prioritering van onderwerpen gaat (Cobb & Elder, 1971). Elk politiek stelsel heeft beperkte capaciteit om een groot aantal agendapunten te verwerken. Wegens bounded rationality is de aandacht van beleidsmakers schaars en begrensd tot een klein aantal kwesties (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). Om die reden neigen beleidsmakers informatie te negeren zolang als mogelijk is, of overreageren ze door onevenredig veel aandacht toe te wijzen. Dit resulteert in een patroon waarin een kwestie lang relatief weinig aandacht krijgt afgewisseld met plotselinge aandachtspieken (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005).

Het bestuderen van agendavorming in de EU kan worden herleid naar medio jaren '90, en in het bijzonder naar een artikel van Guy Peters (1994; zie ook 2001), dat benadrukte dat de Europese Gemeenschap vele toegangsmogelijkheden voor policy entrepreneurs biedt en een groot aantal fora met flexibele grenzen van competentiegebieden omvat. Sindsdien heeft het onderzoek zich in een aantal

richtingen ontwikkeld. Zo hebben studies van EU-agendavorming zich geconcentreerd op de rol van de verschillende instellingen en de lidstaten van de EU in het proces (b.v. Blom-Hansen, 2008; Bunse, 2009; Hartlapp, Metz, & Rauh, 2010; 2013; Tallberg, 2003), de betrokkenheid van georganiseerde belangen (b.v. Coen & Richardson, 2009; Klüver, 2013), issue framing en onderliggende strategieën erachter (b.v. Daviter, 2001; Rhinard, 2010), agendadynamieken van op zichzelf staande beleidskwesties (b.v. Ackrill & Kay, 2011; Moschella, 2011), evenals theorieontwikkeling over het specifieke karakter van EU-agendavorming en testen in welke mate bestaande theorieën in de EU-context van toepassing zijn (b.v. Citi, 2013; Princen & Rhinard, 2006; Princen & Kerremans, 2008).

De eenvoudig lijkende vraag “Wie bepaalt de EU-agenda?” kent geen makkelijk antwoord. Volgens de verdragen heeft de Europese Commissie een monopolie over wetgevende initiatieven. Academics hebben echter vaker op een complexe onderlinge afhankelijkheid van de belangrijkste EU-organen in agendavorming gewezen (Cini, 1996: 145-146; Marks, Hooghe, & Blank, 1996: 359). Princen en Rhinard (2006) betogen dat dit proces uiteindelijk volgens twee mechanismen kan verlopen: via high en low politics routes. In het geval van agendavorming via de lage politieke route beginnen de kwesties in expertgroepen binnen de Commissie en beklimmen de ladder van de organisatorische hiërarchie van de EU. De top-down weg van de hoge politieke route begint bij de staatshoofden en regeringsleiders van de EU-lidstaten en hoe deze, met name in de Europese Raad, op elkaar inwerken, waarna een kwestie in de formele beleidsvormingsmachinerie belandt. Hiermee wordt de rol van de Europese Raad in EU agendavorming als essentieel erkend. De Schoutete en Wallace stellen dat de Europese Raad sinds diens oprichting “de agenda van de Unie heeft bepaald, vooral ook omdat de EU zich verder heeft ontwikkeld dan de specifieke taken zoals vastgelegd in de oorspronkelijke verdragen” (2002: 10). Hij is de incubator van nieuwe initiatieven geweest, die vervolgens door de Commissie moesten worden opgenomen en zijn conclusies hebben „impulsen“ aan besluitvormingsprocessen en aan de Europese integratie in het algemeen geleverd (Eggermont, 2012: 359).

Echter, tot dusverre heeft de academische interesse in de Europese Raad zich voornamelijk geconcentreerd op institutionele/functionele en juridische aspecten van de evolutie van dit orgaan (zie Bulmer & Wessels, 1987; Eggermont, 2012; Johnston, 1994; Stäsche, 2011; Taulègne, 1988; Werts, 1992; 2008; Wessels, 1980) en is het onderwerp agendavorming goeddeels vermeden. Dit is niet verrassend aangezien de Europese Raad buiten de verdragen ontstond en er lange tijd buiten bleef (tot het Verdrag van Maastricht, 1993). Pas in het Verdrag van Lissabon (2009) is hij als EU-instelling benoemd. Voorts hebben de besloten vergaderingen, waarin de nadruk ligt op informaliteit, zich jarenlang verborgen afgespeeld, waardoor het moeilijk was er inzicht in te krijgen (zie Tallberg, 2008). Daarom zijn pogingen om de kwesties die bij de Europese Raad toppen worden besproken en hun determinanten te categoriseren beperkt gebleven. Bulmer en Wessels (1987) en Bonvicini en Regelsberger (1991) stelden een mengeling van functionele soorten kwesties en inhoudelijke beleidsonderwerpen voor, die overgebleven vraagstukken van vorige vergaderingen omvat, plotselinge gebeurtenissen die aandacht behoeven, prioriteiten van het voorzitterschap en de lidstaten, zaken betreffende de economische en sociale ontwikkeling van de Gemeenschap en internationale ontwikkelingen. Er is een enigszins substantiëlere categorisering van inhoudelijke beleidsterreinen verschenen in EU handboeken. Nugent (2010) onderscheidt bijvoorbeeld zes algemene gebieden: de evolutie van de EU, constitutionele en institutionele punten, economisch en monetair beleid, uitbreiding, externe betrekkingen, en specifieke interne beleidskwesties. Wessels (2008a; 2008b) bracht het categoriseren van het activiteitenprofiel een stap verder door het aantal kopjes in de conclusies te tellen en deze te verdelen onder vijf soorten beleidsterreinen – constitutioneel, sociaal-economisch, intern beleid, extern beleid en overige punten – waarbij elk uit een paar subcategorieën bestaat.

Hoewel deze studies onze kennis over welke issues toegang tot de Europese Raad agenda krijgen hebben vergroot, zijn zij te algemeen of lijden zij aan tekortkomingen in de meetmethoden. Daarom stelt deze dissertatie een nieuwe methode voor om de agenda van de Europese Raad te analyseren door de inhoud van de conclusies op een meer gedetailleerde manier te meten en te bestuderen. Met deze intentie is een dataset gebouwd op basis van alle conclusies vanaf de eerste vergadering in 1975 tot en met

eind 2012, gecodeerd met behulp van het codeboek van het EU Policy Agendas Project (de EU-versie van het Comparative Agendas Project codeboek). De inhoudsanalyse van de conclusies maakt longitudinaal onderzoek mogelijk met betrekking tot beleidskwesties die op de agenda staan en de hoeveelheid aandacht die aan deze beleidskwesties wordt toegewezen. De dataset die deze coderingsonderneming opleverde bestaat uit meer dan 44000 (quasi-)zinnen, die elk één enkel beleidsissue bevatten. De kwesties zijn volgens het codeboek onder algemene onderwerpscategorieën geschaard, elk bestaand uit een aantal kwesties. De dataset behandelt een totaal van 126 gepubliceerde documenten over een periode van 38 jaar, waarin 154 vergaderingen plaatsvonden. Van sommige vergaderingen, vooral informele, zijn geen conclusies. Deze empirische benadering maakt een systematische exploratie van de samenstelling van de agenda mogelijk, net als het testen van hypothesen betreffende de aard van het toewijzen van aandacht in longitudinaal perspectief.

Hoewel de Europese Raad zijn eigen agenda kan bepalen en dit ook doet, is deze agenda een strijdtoneel tussen diverse belangen. De formulering brengt complexe interacties tussen actoren met verschillende motivaties met zich mee, welke zich afspelen in een context van beperkingen in het verwerken van informatie en druk uit de omgeving. De mate waarin de agenda gestalte kan worden gegeven, d.w.z. de mate waarin nieuwe issues geïntroduceerd worden of geplande kwesties worden uitgesteld, hangt van een aantal factoren af. Zij kunnen in drie algemene categorieën worden gegroepeerd – institutionele omstandigheden, het effect van externe belanghebbenden en de “probleemstroom”.

De eerste groep factoren – de institutionele – bestaat uit zowel eigenschappen van de Europese Raad als beleidsforum als van de institutionele inrichting van de EU in zijn geheel. Hoewel EU-bevoegdheden hier nauwelijks een factor zijn (zie b.v. de Schoutheete, 2012), zouden rolverwachtingen over de institutie wel relevant kunnen zijn. Zo zou het feit dat de Europese Raad de algemene richting van de EU-ontwikkeling bepaalt kunnen betekenen dat hij zich vooral met een klein aantal kwesties bezighoudt dat centraal staat in het functioneren van het EU systeem van governance, vergelijkbaar met de uitvoerende macht in natiestaten (Jennings et al.,

2011). De voorkeuren van de individuele lidstaten maken ook een deel uit van deze groep, aangezien de Europese Raad de belangrijkste arena voor nationale belangen is in de EU. Eerder onderzoek wijst uit dat er tussen landen geen vaste coalities op de lange termijn bestaan die wel een duidelijk stempel op de agenda hebben weten te drukken (Tallberg, 2008; Tallberg & Johansson, 2008). Andere EU-instellingen, bijvoorbeeld de Europese Commissie (Eggermont, 2012), kunnen ook proberen om hun stempel op de agenda van de Europese Raad te drukken. Het voorzitterschap van de Raad, dat tot de inwerkingtreding van het Verdrag van Lissabon onder de lidstaten roteerde, is een ander potentieel institutioneel toegangspunt. Het land dat het functie bezette kon de rol als voorzitter gebruiken voor het bevorderen van binnenlandse belangen (Elgström & Tallberg, 2003).

De tweede groep factoren die aan de dynamiek van agendavorming ten grondslag ligt heeft betrekking op externe belanghebbenden. Dit zijn actoren die niet direct betrokken zijn bij de Europese Raad maar die potentieel een indirect effect kunnen uitoefenen. Theoretisch gezien omvat deze categorie georganiseerde belangen, de media en het brede publiek. Maar in tegenstelling tot de Commissie en het Parlement, en net als bij de Raad van Ministers, is de Europese Raad nauwelijks een doel voor de lobby van georganiseerde belangen. Het is bijna onmogelijk voor belangengroepen om de Europese Raad te belobbyen wegens het gebrek aan transparantie van de vergaderingen, de norm van de consensusbesluitvorming en de afwezigheid van permanent personeel (Hayes-Renshaw, 2009). Media lijken even zeer weinig directe invloed te hebben op de Europese Raad, en waarschijnlijk voor de EU als geheel, aangezien er geen echte berichtgeving op Europees niveau bestaat en nationale media divergerende agenda's hebben. De enige mogelijke relevante actor zou hier het publiek kunnen zijn in termen van één of ander gezamenlijk niveau van de voorkeur van burgers in de EU (aangezien er ook geen Europese demos bestaat).

Een derde groep factoren die de verdeling van aandacht kan structureren is vastgelegd in wat Kingdon (1984) de „probleemstroom“ noemt. Hier kunnen diverse kwestie-indicatoren worden overwogen, zoals bijvoorbeeld werkloosheid of milieuvervuiling. Hoewel dergelijke indicatoren issue-specifiek zijn en daarom gewoonlijk een effect op de aandacht voor een bepaalde kwestie hebben, zouden er manieren kunnen zijn om



de rol van probleemindicatoren op een meer algemeen niveau te analyseren. Echter, een kwestie is nooit een probleem van zich zelf – zij moet door deelnemers in het spel van agendavorming gedefinieerd worden als probleem. Sommige typen indicatoren maken mogelijk meer kans om door de Europese Raad te worden opgepikt. Een andere factor in deze groep zijn onverwachte plotselinge majeure gebeurtenissen die het potentieel hebben om eerder opgestelde prioriteiten van een gegeven moment te doorkruisen (Birkland, 1997; 1998). Deze zogenaamde focusing events of crises zouden voor een studie in het kader van de Europese Raad bijzonder relevant kunnen zijn wegens de vrijheid van de Raad in het plannen van vergaderingen en vanwege de representatieve positie als arena voor het uitdrukken van de “gezamenlijke stem“ van de EU.

Dit proefschrift bestaat uit vijf individuele studies die samen het doel hebben om ons begrip te verhogen over de types van kwesties die bij de Europese Raad toppen worden behandeld en de factoren achter hun verschijning en prioriteitstelling. De dissertatie heeft als eerste doel om de aard van de agenda te classificeren met betrekking tot de status van de instelling in het EU-beleidsvormingskader, met focus op de omvang en het niveau van veranderingen in aandacht. Daarna, met het oog op de drie brede categorieën van potentiële agendadeterminanten – institutionele omstandigheden, het effect van externe belanghebbenden en de „probleemstroom“ – evalueert het onderzoek de rol van specifieke aspecten binnen de categorieën.

De eerste studie (hoofdstuk 2) toont aan dat over de bijna vier decennia van zijn functioneren de Europese Raad vele kwesties heeft behandeld maar dat de algemene aandacht onevenredig is verdeeld. De meest zichtbare thema's zijn de kernfunctiegebieden van overheden – buitenlandse zaken, macro-economisch beleid en bestuurlijke kwesties, die samen de helft van de agenda innemen. Het patroon van verschuiven in aandacht over onderwerpen door de tijd correspondeert goed met de punctuated equilibrium theory, waarin wordt voorspeld dat relatieve stabiliteit wordt onderbroken door aanzienlijke veranderingen. Het patroon van aandacht van de Europese Raad is opmerkelijk door zijn nog sterkere niveau van hoge negatieve verandering. Voor deze instelling is het vrij gemakkelijk om de ene keer aandacht te besteden aan één onderwerp en het volledig te negeren bij de volgende top. Bijna geen

beleidsthema, behalve de grote drie, ontloopt het risico buiten de agenda te vallen. Ondanks deze opmerkelijke eigenschap is de hoeveelheid grote aandachtsverschuivingen (kurtosis) vrijwel gelijk aan die van andere typen agenda's, zoals hoorzittingen in het Congres in de V.S. of coalitieovereenkomsten in parlementaire meer-partijen stelsels. Dit wijst op de dubbele taak van de Europese Raad in het instellingskader van de EU. Hij brengt beleid in beweging door nieuwe programma's te initiëren en acties af te vaardigen aan andere instellingen, maar produceert tegelijkertijd beleidsoutputs door het nemen van essentiële besluiten of door op te treden als arbiter in conflicten.

Wat betreft de aard van de verandering in aandacht door de tijd, heeft de agenda van de Europese Raad een evolutie in zowel omvang als verspreiding ondergaan. Tijdens de vroege jaren van de instelling, van medio jaren '70 tot het eind van de jaren '80, werd de agenda geleidelijk aan meer divers maar vertoonde ook heel wat instabiliteit tussen opeenvolgende jaren. Sinds het Verdrag van Maastricht, bleef de algemene tendens van stijgende fragmentatie, hoewel bij een langzamere snelheid, en werd een extra effect zichtbaar. De periode 1991-2010 kenmerkt zich door drie gelijkaardige oscillerende patronen na elkaar – bewegend van concentratie naar diversiteit en terug naar concentratie. Deze specifieke vorm is enigszins een weerspiegeling van het in evenwicht brengen tussen tegenstrijdige krachten, zoals uitbreiding van gebieden van betrokkenheid en de behoefte om zich op grote problemen te concentreren. Maar hij schijnt nog meer betrekking te hebben op het aandeel van aandacht voor de drie kernonderwerpen op de agenda – buitenlandse zaken, macro-economisch beleid en bestuurlijke zaken. Tijdens de periode vanaf 1991, toen de aandacht voor deze drie thema's steeg, verminderde de diversiteit van de agenda, terwijl deze in periodes van verminderde aandacht voor deze thema's steeg. Ten slotte, concentratie en fragmentatie schijnen beïnvloed te worden door het totale volume van de agenda, waarbij er meer diversiteit valt waar te nemen wanneer het volume toeneemt.

Corresponderend met de politiek verheven positie van de instelling is de aandacht in de Europese Raad groter voor onderwerpen binnen het werkingsgebied van kernfuncties van overheden. Dit is het type issuekarakter met de sterkste conditionerende macht voor de distributie van aandacht. Desalniettemin toont

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hoofdstuk 3 aan dat een tweede lijn issuekarakter met kleinere verklarende waarde ook een rol kan spelen, al is de mate waarin variabel over tijd. Bepaalde onderwerpen kunnen meer aandacht krijgen wanneer economische attributen worden onderstreept, wat het mogelijk maakt voor niet-kerntaken om aanzienlijk veel aandacht te krijgen op vergaderingen wanneer zij in economische verwijzingen en implicaties worden verpakt. Het selecteren welk issuekarakter te benadrukken is hoofdzakelijk een politiek besluit in de handen van die deelnemers in het beleidsproces die invloed hebben over agendavorming, handelend binnen de beperkingen van externe invloeden. Als dit model op de Europese Raad wordt toegepast, is het mogelijk om te zien welke factoren de oorzaak zijn van de stijgingen en dalingen in prominentie van de economische karakterlijn. Tijdens de periode 1995-2006 was werd de aandacht ook mede door de economische dimensie beïnvloed, omdat de Europese Raad een hoofdzakelijk linkse ideologische oriëntatie had en het gezamenlijke overheidstekortcijfer in de EU stijgende was.

Terwijl over het algemeen geen specifiek staatshoofd of regeringsleider systematisch als bevoordeeld kan worden gezien wanneer het over het bepleiten van individuele belangen op de EU-agenda gaat, wordt de functie van het voorzitterschap – dat tot aan het Verdrag van Lissabon met in de instelling van een permanent voorzitter halfjaarlijkse roteerde – vaak beschouwd als een sleutel tot dergelijke invloed. De grondige vergelijkende analyse in hoofdstuk 4 toont aan dat het de voorzitter ontbreekt aan enig voorrecht in de agendavorming in de Europese Raad. Deze conclusie volgt uit een onderzoek van prioriteitenstelling in de Europese Raad conclusies en nationale uitvoerende agenda's in vijf lidstaten: Denemarken, Frankrijk, Nederland, Spanje en het Verenigd Koninkrijk. Deze vijf landen vormen een representatieve steekproef van de gehele bevolking van EU-lidstaten in termen van grootte en ligging (op zijn minst tot de grote uitbreiding). Geen van deze landen wist het voorzitterschap te gebruiken om de Europese agenda te convergeren met de eigen nationale agenda. Het voorzitterschap lijkt dus geen institutioneel voordeel op te leveren in de beïnvloeding van de hele agenda van de Europese Raad.

De Europese Raad staat bovenaan de politieke hiërarchie in de EU, een positie vrij ver van de gewone burgers, wat de verwachting opwekt dat we geen directe interactie

tussen de twee zouden kunnen verwachten. Maar wegens zijn zichtbaarheid en vrijheid in de keuze van onderwerpen zou de Europese Raad zowel de motivatie als de capaciteit kunnen hebben om toch op publieke zorgen te reageren. In feite kan hij dit op een retorische manier doen, door meer aandacht aan de thema's te geven die de burgers op een bepaald ogenblik belangrijk vinden. De analyse van het verband tussen de agenda's van de Europese topinstelling en het EU-publiek op tien verschillende beleidsgebieden in hoofdstuk 5 toont onderscheid in responsiviteit, d.w.z. dat deze slechts op sommige kwestiegebieden aanwezig is. De mate waarin de Europese Raad aandacht besteedt aan misdaad, economie, milieu en immigratie wordt goed voorspeld door de prioriteitenstelling van deze onderwerpen op de probleemlijst van de burgers. Op de thema's onderwijs, werkgelegenheid, gezondheid, inflatie, belastingheffing en terrorisme is geen relatie gevonden. Het responsiviteitspatroon wijst niet op traditionele domeinen binnen de vergaderingen van de Europese Raad, en meer onderzoek is noodzakelijk om de logica achter de bestaande onderscheiden responsiviteit te ontwarren. Toch heeft het er alle schijn van dat de bevoegden van de EU ten minste gedeeltelijk een rol spelen, wat met name zichtbaar is wanneer het niveau van responsiviteit wordt overwogen. Inzake milieukwesties, waarvoor de EU meer bevoegdheden en een sterkere beleidsbetrokkenheid heeft, volgt de Europese Raad openbare zorgen meer dan in het geval van misdaad, economie, en immigratie.

De agenda van de EU toppen wordt vaak beïnvloed door focusing events. Deze lang geleden voorgestelde stelling wordt empirisch kwantitatief onderzocht in hoofdstuk 6. De resultaten tonen aan dat tien procent van de inhoud in de conclusies met een focusing event wordt geassocieerd. Maar alhoewel de Europese Raad een zeker mate van aandacht heeft geschonken aan diverse plotse gebeurtenissen, heeft hij in geen geval alle gebeurtenissen besproken die potentieel konden worden overwogen als 'focusing' in de loop van de laatste bijna 40 jaar. De EU-leiders hebben selectiemechanismen in gezet op basis van kenmerken van de crisissituatie en de verhouding tussen de EU en de geografische locatie van de gebeurtenis. Focusing events hebben een hogere kans om op de agenda te verschijnen wanneer zij door de mens veroorzaakt zijn (d.w.z. niet natuurlijk). Zij zullen ook eerder worden besproken wanneer zij plaatsvinden in een buurland of een aangrenzende regio. Het aantal

slachtoffers speelt een rol maar het effect daarvan is niet helder en hangt waarschijnlijk van het type gebeurtenis af. Zodra een gebeurtenis op de agenda staat, bestaat er enig verschil tussen de factoren die de hoeveelheid van aandacht kunnen beïnvloeden. Focusing events die in buurlanden gebeuren zijn ook in aandachtsniveaus prominenter, en worden ook positief beïnvloed door de sterkte van de economische banden tussen het land in kwestie en de EU.

Naast de empirische bijdrage levert dit proefschrift een kleine theoretische bijdrage door manieren voor te stellen waarin de bestaande theorieën kunnen worden uitgebreid en verder methodologisch kunnen worden ontwikkeld. Één van de belangrijkste toevoegingen aan de agendavorming theorie die dit onderzoek in deze dissertatie doet is de toepassing van het punctuated equilibrium model op de Europese Raad. Net als andere politieke instellingen moet de Europese Raad vechten met het probleem van bounded rationality en sommige onderwerpen slachtofferen terwijl andere onderwerpen extra aandacht krijgen tijdens zijn toppen. Het feit dat de aard van de verandering in aandacht in deze instelling lijkt op die van andere procesagenda's, zoals bijvoorbeeld parlementaire interpellaties in Denemarken en België of hoorzittingen in het Congres van de V.S. (Baumgartner et al., 2009), bevestigt nogmaals dat er een systematische logica betreffende het verloop van aandacht op beleidsagenda's kan worden onderscheiden. Deze logica is ook van toepassing op het EU-systeem.

Het onderzoek naar verschuivingen in aandacht dat zich op het tijdelijke aspect van dergelijke dynamieken concentreert draagt verder bij aan het substantiëren van het punctuated equilibrium model. Door gebruik te maken van entropie scores als indicator van agendadiversiteit (John & Jennings, 2010), is het mogelijk om de evolutie in aandacht in termen van omvang en verspreiding te classificeren over bepaalde perioden. Agendadiversiteit kan verder aan institutionele voorwaarden en de aard van aandacht over onderwerpen worden gerelateerd. De bevindingen over entropie van de Europese Raad agenda tonen aan dat in de vroege jaren de instelling nog zijn plaats in de institutionele architectuur aan het vinden was. Hij breidde ook geleidelijk zijn bereik van activiteit uit. Sinds de vroege jaren '90 is een gelijksoortig bepaald voorwaardelijk effect op andere agenda's zichtbaar (Jennings et al., 2011) – de

stijgingen en dalingen in aandacht voor de drie kerntaken beïnvloedt de algemene agendadiversiteit.

Het onderzoek in dit proefschrift biedt ook een nieuw model voor het verklaren van agendavorming via het concept van het issuekarakter. Het benadrukken van een specifieke soort issuekarakter door politieke actoren heeft directe impact op de toewijzing van aandacht. In de Europese Raad conditioneert een economische lading, naast de logica van de kernthema's, de relatieve aanwezigheid van onderwerpen op de agenda. Zo kan issuekarakter als intermediaire stap worden gebruikt voor het voorspellen van de algemene toewijzing van politieke aandacht via andere theoretisch afgeleide factoren. Deze factoren kunnen op zowel de deelnemers in het beleidsproces als de context rond hen worden betrokken. De studie van de economische issuekarakterlijn in de Europese Raad toont aan dat in de praktijk beide typen elementen toenames van zijn belangrijkheid beïnvloeden. Het twee-stadia model voor het voorspellen van de allocatie van aandacht kan op iedere politieke agenda worden toegepast. Het biedt een nieuwe benadering om het negeren van competitie tussen kwesties en bounded rationality te verklaren in studies die gericht zijn op de factoren die de aandacht voor een bepaald beleidsdomein beïnvloeden.

Een andere theoretische vordering wordt weerspiegeld in het onderzoek van de term retorische responsiviteit (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008). Dit concept dat enkelen jaren geleden werd geïntroduceerd is een toevoeging aan de literatuur van politieke responsiviteit door te benadrukken dat het reageren aan publieke eisen niet alleen met efficiënte beleidsoutputs maar ook met algemene besprekingen en overwegingen wordt geassocieerd. Kort samengevat, de toewijzing van politieke aandacht is ook een soort van responsiviteit, de meest passende wijze voor sommige instellingen om te reageren. Gezien de politieke status alsmede ook een zekere symbolische rol van de conclusies van de Europese Raad en het algemene formele gebrek aan wetgevende bevoegdheden van deze instelling, verschijnt het als perfect doel voor de zoektocht naar retorische responsiviteit. De eerste studie die zich hier op richt op EU-niveau vertoont de relevantie van dit concept. De bevindingen van onderscheiden niveaus van responsiviteit duiden behoefte aan verdere theoretisering op de logica achter dergelijke selectieve reactiviteit aan.

De laatste studie in de dissertatie maakt de eerste stappen in de opbouw van een systematische theorie van aandacht voor focusing events in politieke fora. Het idee dat plotselinge opvallende gebeurtenissen agenda's kunnen veranderen is oud maar de voorwaarden waaronder zij effect sorteren is niet systematisch onderzocht. Er zijn twee type factoren die de waarschijnlijkheid dat potentiële focusing events ook daadwerkelijke focusing events worden kunnen verklaren vanuit het perspectief van het reagerende forum: exogene en endogene. De exogene kenmerken vloeien direct voort uit de aard van de gebeurtenis, zoals omvang of type. De endogene kenmerken wijzen op een verband tussen het forum van agendavorming en de plaats van het voorkomen. De politieke en economische relaties tussen staten of bepaalde onderlinge afhankelijkheden behoren bijvoorbeeld tot deze groep. De endogene eigenschappen kunnen ook op de aard van de agenda betrekking hebben, met name op zijn capaciteit om extra kwesties op te nemen. De studie over de Europese Raad toont aan dat de verschillende specifieke factoren binnen beide categorieën de plaatsing van focusing events op de agenda en het niveau van aandacht die zij hebben ontvangen hebben bepaald.

Kortom, dit proefschrift heeft ons begrip verhoogd van de manier waarop agendavorming binnen de hoogste politieke instelling van de EU gebeurt en biedt waardevolle suggesties aan om agendavorming theorieën uit te breiden. De empirische bevindingen tonen aan dat de Europese Raad informatie onevenredig verwerkt, wat in een onderbroken patroon van veranderingen in aandacht resulteert. Elementen van alle drie categorieën van agendadeterminanten – institutionele omstandigheden, het effect van externe belanghebbenden en de „probleemstroom“ – hebben mogelijk invloed op de agendavorming, ieder afhankelijk van diverse voorwaarden. Institutionele rolverwachtingen voorspellen de houding van de Europese Raad ten aanzien van de kernthema's van regeringen. De institutionele context, in elk geval voor wat betreft het voorzitterschap, voegt niet aan de hefboomwerking van individuele lidstaten in het bepleiten van binnenlandse voorkeuren toe. Het publiek is geen genegeerde externe belanghebbenden ondanks zijn afstand, al worden de zorgen van burgers slechts selectief behandeld. De probleemstroom zet duidelijk druk op de staatshoofden en regeringsleiders om te reageren. Toenemende negatieve indicatoren,

zoals begrotingstekort, kunnen de EU-leiders aansporen om een nadruk op het economisch karakter van diverse domeinen te leggen. Ten slotte kunnen focusing events met specifieke kenmerken de agenda doorkruisen door nieuwe kwesties op de agenda te zetten die een deel van de aandacht opeisen.

Wat betreft de theorie blijkt het punctuated equilibrium model op de Europese Raad van toepassing te zijn en een vruchtbare manier bieden om verschuivingen in aandacht te verklaren. De analyse van retorische responsiviteit in het EU multi-level stelsel levert gemengde resultaten op, die de behoefte aan verdere theoretiseren op de logica achter onderscheiden responsiviteit aantonen en op een mogelijke mengeling van bekwaamheden en institutionele rollen wijzen. De studies in deze dissertatie maken ook eerste stappen naar theoretisering door een twee-stadia model voor te dragen voor het ontwarren van de samenstelling van volledige agenda's over lange termijnen. Tot slot draagt het speuren in de logica van de aandacht aan focusing events argumenten aan waarop een volwaardige theorie van reactiviteit aan dergelijke gebeurtenissen kan worden gefundeerd.



## 11. Curriculum Vitae

Petya Alexandrova completed secondary education at the Secondary School with the Study of European Languages “St. Constantine Cyril – The Philosopher” in Ruse, Bulgaria. Between 2005 and 2008 she followed a Bachelor’s programme in International Politics and History at Jacobs University Bremen, Germany. In 2009 she earned a Master’s degree in Contemporary European Studies taught collaboratively by the European American University Consortium, after studying at the University of Bath, UK, Charles University Prague, The Czech Republic, and Humboldt University Berlin, Germany. Since May 2010 Petya Alexandrova has been working as a PhD Researcher at the Montesquieu Institute and Leiden University, Faculty Campus The Hague in The Netherlands and taught courses in public policy, EU policies and research methodology. She followed the PhD training programme of the Netherlands Institute of Government (NIG) and participated in the Winter School in Social Science Research Methods at the University of Limerick, Ireland. Her research has been published in the Australian and New Zealand Journal of European Studies, the Policy Studies Journal, the Journal of Common Market Studies, the European Journal of Political Research, and European Union Politics.

