Voting Behavior in the Council of the European Union after the 2004 Enlargement

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Abstract

This paper explores voting patterns in the Council of the European Union (EU) between May 2004 and the end of December 2006, studying the full set of voting records for this institution. It analyzes government vote choices in the Council on the basis of ordered logistic regression analysis, explaining the propensity of EU member states to vote ‘yes’, abstain from voting, or vote ‘no’. The paper explains voting behavior in the Council on the basis of selected independent variables, notably governments' absolute and relative positions on the left-right policy dimension, support for European integration among domestic audiences, member states’ population size and their positions as either net beneficiaries or net payers into the EU budget. Our empirical analysis reveals that voting behavior is markedly different for the group of the EU’s older as compared to its newer member states, with some of our explanatory variables even displaying opposite signs for these two groups in our statistical analyses.

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1. Introduction

Patterns of decision making in the European Union (EU), in recent decades, have been subjected to vigorous formal analysis. However, less attention has been paid to the empirical analysis of voting patterns in the Council of the European Union (i.e. the 'Council of Ministers'). This may partially be explained by the fact that traditionally, decisions in the Council were entirely non-public. Although both the transparency of decision making and the flow of information regarding Council decisions have considerably increased, notably since the mid-1990s, there remains a lack of systematic analysis of voting behavior in the Council.

However, earlier empirical analyses of Council voting records are Lane and Mattila (1998), Hosli (1999) and Mattila and Lane (2001). On the basis of data collection on EU member states' actual voting behavior in the Council, Mattila (2004) studies reasons for EU states to choose specific voting options. He presents a range of hypotheses, partially based on recent literature, and tests them on the basis of empirical data. In an analysis close to Mattila (2004), Hagemann (2005) explores potential factors that influence Council voting behavior. She uses similar data, but partially extends the database used in Mattila's research by accounting for different stages of decision making in the EU decision-making process (i.e. whether votes in the Council are cast at the final stage of the legislative process or before the last stage).

More recently, Hayes-Renshaw et al. (2006) give an in-depth analysis of Council voting patterns and assess clusters among member states indicating government voting behavior in this institution. Plechanovová (2008), on the basis of an extensive data collection on Council voting behavior, in the different stages of the EU legislative process, explores voting patterns since the 2004 enlargement. Her empirical analysis reveals that there are no consistent patterns of coalition-building among EU governments in Council voting behavior. Her cluster analysis shows that, against common expectations, there also are no given divisions in this institution when comparing the EU's 'new' with its older member states.

A striking feature of Council decision-making is that decision-making is usually by consensus. Reaching consensus, however, is likely to be more difficult with a higher

number of member states. In general terms, it seems that governments as represented in the Council either cast negative votes or abstain from voting if they wish to 'make a point' in domestic politics. Accordingly, actual voting in the Council is rather rare and only a small percentage of decisions are characterized by 'contested votes', i.e. decisions in which some Council members vote against the majority or abstain from voting (e.g. Mattila and Lane 2001, Hosli 2007, Plechanovová 2008). The small share of contested decisions probably means that governments do not necessarily want to record their dissent officially. This pattern may be especially relevant when the respective decision is rather insignificant to the home country.

This paper aims to build on former empirical work on Council voting behavior by examining information available on cleavages, votes and decision behavior within the Council after the 2004 enlargement. We aim to determine which factors best explain variation in EU states' voting behavior in the Council for the post-2004 phase. We notably aim to determine similarities and differences between the 'new' and 'old' EU member states.

On the basis of our multivariate exploration of Council voting behavior, we aim to reveal possible systematic underlying factors that determine vote outcomes in the Council. The paper is structured as follows. The next section provides an overview of earlier studies of Council decision-making and theoretical insights into cleavage structures in EU politics. Section three describes our data as they have been collected from different sources and provides an overview of how we 'measure' the independent variables of our analysis. Section four presents and discusses the results of our statistical analysis Finally, section five summarizes the main findings of our paper and concludes.

2. Cleavages in European Union Politics and Literature on Council Decision-Making

Various studies explore policy dimensions that may be relevant to EU politics. For example, on the basis of an analysis of party manifestos by European parliamentary groups, Hix (1999), partially confirming earlier insights by Hix and Lord (1997), finds that two major policy dimensions structure actor behavior in EU policy making: an integration-independence dimension and a left-right policy dimension. In research on the

European Parliament (EP), roll call analyses show that the party groups' voting behaviour reflects their corresponding positions on the left-right dimension (Raunio 1997). Hix, Noury and Roland (2006), in their analysis of roll call votes in the EP, find evidence for an almost exclusive left-right division. By comparison, Aspinwall (2002) analyzes government preferences regarding the Treaty of Amsterdam on the basis of information contained in an EP report. His analysis confirms the importance of a left-right division in EU politics.

Mattila (2004), in this analysis, uses the location of actors on the left-right scale based on the data provided by Hix and Lord (1997: 27-49). Focusing his research on voting behavior in the Council between 1995 and 2000, however, he finds that the left-right policy dimension has only moderate explanatory power regarding the decision of EU member states to either abstain or cast a negative vote in the Council. By contrast, the left-right policy division generates strongly significant results in the analysis presented by Hagemann (2005). Her measures are based on placements of political parties on a left-right policy dimension as given in Benoit and Laver (2006). Both studies reveal a positive relationship between negative votes or abstentions in the Council and left-right policy locations, suggesting that right-of-center governments in the EU are more inclined to oppose the majority in the Council than those that are situated left-of-center. Both studies also find an interaction between this policy dimension and support for EU integration. Including additional information on left-right positioning into the analysis, notably calculations for each year between 1995 and 2004, Hosli (2007) finds that it is not absolute left-right placement that matters but relative positioning as regards the propensity of governments to oppose the majority in EU Council voting. Accordingly, the further a government is situated from the average EU government left-right position, the higher its probability to oppose the Council majority.

Mattila (2004) also employs EU governments' extent of 'Euroskepticism' or support for European integration, as an explanatory variable. Hagemann (2005) approximates governments' position on the 'more-less integration' scale by using data based on expert surveys as provided in Marks and Steenbergen (2004). As Eurobarometer (EB) data are available twice a year basis for the time period analyzed here, we will use Eurobarometer information on public support for EU integration for the 2004 to 2006

time span. In accordance with earlier research, it is assumed that governments of EU states with a 'pro-European' public will tend to agree with the majority and will also be less inclined to either cast a negative vote or abstain in the framework of Council voting procedures.

In an empirical study of decision-making in the EU for the time span 1999 to 2001, Thomson et al. (2004) find that there are no clear dimensions on which actors align in EU policy making. The only dimension for which some (relatively weak) empirical support can be found is a North-South cleavage. However, the study finds that apart from this division there are no clear and consistent patterns of coalition formation among governments in EU decision-making. Similarly, Elgström et al. (2001) find little evidence for cleavages in EU decision making apart from a North-South division in processes of EU coalition formation; these findings are largely supported by Zimmer et al. (2005).

Research aiming to test the potential existence of a 'North-South cleavage' in EU politics usually distinguishes between EU states as either 'net beneficiaries' or 'net payers' with regards to the EU budget. 'Net beneficiaries' generally benefit from domestic publics who are supportive of EU integration. Mattila (2004), in a bivariate assessment of voting behavior, finds the influence of governments' EU budget status on voting outcomes to be significant. However, the significance no longer materializes in his multivariate exploration of Council voting records. Similarly, the North-South division has no significant effect in the analysis presented by Hagemann (2005). Nonetheless, net budget status will be used as an additional explanatory variable for voting behavior in the Council in this paper, assuming, in accordance with earlier research, that 'net beneficiaries' will be more inclined to vote with the majority in formal Council voting procedures.

Several studies have illustrated potential divisions between small and large states in the EU (e.g. Moberg 1998, 2002). In general terms, larger member states are likely to have more influence in the preparatory stages of any decision. This is because the officials in the preparatory work have to take into account the opinions of the large countries in advance in order to ensure the success of their proposals. On the other hand, the available roll call analyses show that large countries vote against the majority clearly more often than smaller countries (e.g. Mattila and Lane 2001). Heisenberg (2005)

emphasizes that the propensity to vote against a proposal in the Council, or to abstain, is correlated with size rather than with wealth, net contributor status or the number of years a state has been a member of the EU. Hence, it is interesting to explore whether the size of EU member states, as measured by their voting weight in the Council, affects respective voting behavior.

Several authors have explored the role and significance of the Council presidency (e.g. Tallberg 2004, Schout and Vanhoonacker 2006). Research often focuses on the question of whether the president tends to act as an 'honest broker' or supports his or her government's interests in Council decision making. The presidency must act as a broker between the other member countries and try to find acceptable solutions to the problems on the table. This means that the presidency must (at least partially) give up the task of promoting its own positions in favour of trying to find solutions that the majority can accept. The role as a collective representative means that the presidency must speak for the EU and its member states in international settings. If the presidency country takes these roles of broker and representative seriously, it means that there is little room for independent action.

Mattila (2004) also includes this variable in his analysis of Council voting records, finding that governments which hold the presidency cast significantly fewer negative votes and have a lower propensity to abstain than other governments in the EU. Mattila's finding is corroborated by Hagemann (2005). Based on these prior explorations, it will subsequently be hypothesized that an EU state holding the presidency will be less inclined to vote against the majority in Council decision making than other EU governments.

3. Data and Operationalization

The Council roll call data used in this paper are based on information released by the Council Secretariat at the Council website (http://ue.eu.int). We notably use the 'Monthly Summary of Council Acts' documents, listing all legislative and non-legislative decisions made by the Council and -- if voting occurred -- which EU member states voted 'no' or abstained from voting. The time period for the analysis is the EU-25, i.e. from 1 May

2004 to 31 December 2006. During this time period, the Council decided on a total of 1358 acts (416 legislative acts and 942 other acts). Of this total, about 38 per cent were Decisions, 32 per cent Regulations, 8 per cent Directives, 6 per cent Joint Actions. The remainder consisted of various other types of decisions (such as resolutions, common positions, declarations and agreements).[1]

In our analysis, the dependent variable is governments' vote choice ('yes', 'no' or abstention). This generates a total of 33'950 observations in our data set: twenty-five EU states multiplied by 1358 acts. Each observation records whether the respective government in the Council voted yes, no or abstained from voting. In our empirical analysis, we treat this variable as ordinal: abstention is assumed to indicate disagreement with the majority opinion, but not to the extent that voting 'no' against the Council majority does. Accordingly, we code 'yes' votes as 1, abstentions as 2 and 'no' votes as 3.[2]

However, roll call data in the Council have several limitations. Most notably, they do not contain information on 'failed' decisions, i.e. proposals that failed to gather the needed majority in the Council to back them. 'Failed' acts are not submitted to formal vote. By comparison, they are usually sent back to lower levels within the Council structure for further discussion. In addition to this, some member states may disagree with the majority, but for some reason, choose not to record their dissent officially by formally voting against the proposal or abstaining from voting. The reason for this may be that the decision in question is relatively insignificant, and its respective media value in the home country low. Whatever the reason, one may assume that the observed number of contested decisions in the Council really amounts to a downwards biased estimate of the true amount of dissent in the Council (Mattila 2004: 31). Finally, it is possible that two countries would vote together against a proposal, but do not actually share similar policy preferences. For example, one EU state may vote against a proposal because it considers suggested cuts in agricultural subsidies to be too large, whereas another member state may vote 'no' because it considers the proposed cuts to be too small.

[1] For more information on this issue, see Mattila (2008).

[2] Also see Hosli (2007) or Hosli and Uriot (2008) on this coding choice.

However, in most cases, it probably is reasonable to assume that member states voting together against a proposal have broadly similar policy preferences.

In our data set, governments' positions on the left-right dimension are measured on the basis of data provided by Benoit and Laver (2006).[3] Benoit and Laver used expert surveys to obtain estimates of the left-right positions of national parties in forty-seven modern democracies. Our index is calculated as a weighted average of these positions, where the weights are the number of ministers each government party had in each government (coalition).[4] The variable measuring the distance between any particular government and the Council average is simply the absolute difference between the position of this government and the weighted position all other governments of EU member states. (to calculate the average position within the Council, member states' number of votes in the Council is used as a weight).

Public support for the EU is measured on the basis of Eurobarometer data. The "EU support" variable measures general EU support among the citizens in the respective member states.[5] It is based on the standard Eurobarometer survey question asking respondents whether they consider the EU membership of their country to be "a good thing", "a bad thing" or neither of these. In our assessment, we measure the difference between the share of respondents indicating that membership is "a good thing" as opposed to it being "a bad thing". The Eurobameter survey is held twice per year; we use

[3] However, as the Benoit-Laver data set does not contain information on left-right positioning for French parties, we use the taxes vs. spending dimension of this dataset for France instead. Respective measurements are rescaled to fit the left-right dimension as given by Benoit and Laver (2006).

[4] The same technique is applied in Hosli (2007) and Hosli and Uriot (2008). To obtain the relevant information, we use monthly data. The 15th day of the month is chosen as the cut-off point for the assessment: If a new government took effect on the 16th day of a month, the score used for that month is the score of the previous government in power (assessed for the remainder of the month). If a new government took office before the 15th, however, the score for the month is determined by the assessment for the new government.

[5] In the future, we aim to integrate newly released information on the post-enlargement phase -- as provided by the Chapel Hill data set on the position of political parties towards European integration -- into our analysis. For more general information on these data, e.g. see Marks and Steenbergen (2004).

results from each spring survey to measure public support for EU integration in the first half of a year and results from the autumn survey for the remaining six months.

EU member countries' positions as net beneficiaries or net contributors to the EU budget are not easy to measure. There are conceptual and practical obstacles to the calculation of the exact financial positions of individual member states (Begg and Grimwade 1998: 86). Nevertheless, the European Commission (2007) has published estimates of member states' annual budget balances. We adopt these figures for our empirical analysis, but express them in terms of percentages of Gross National Income (GNI).[6] Accordingly, figures range from -0.52 per cent for the Netherlands (in 2005) to 2.68 per cent for Greece (in 2006).

The remaining independent variables used in our study are fairly straightforward. The voting weights variable reflects the number of votes each government has in the Council of the EU. The values of this variable range from three votes (Malta) to twenty-nine votes (Germany, France, the UK and Italy). The 'new member states' variable differentiates between member states that joined the Union in 2004 (coded as 1) and the remaining EU states (code 0). Similarly, the presidency variable is based on a dichotomy, with 1 indicating that the respective EU state held the presidency and 0 if it did not. The 'definitive legislation' variable indicates whether the act was a 'definitive legislative act' (coded as 1) or an 'other act' (coded as 0). Usually, definitive legislative acts are more often contested in the Council than other acts (Mattila 2008). Finally, our empirical analysis includes a variable counting the number of other member states formally contesting the proposal within the Council (i.e. voting 'no' or abstaining). The idea motivating inclusion of this control variable is that it is easier for EU states to contest an act by formally opposing the Council majority when some of the other member states do the same. Hence, we expect this variable to be positively correlated with the dependent variable in our analysis: knowing that other governments as represented in the Council contest a proposal may encourage other Council members to follow suit.

[6] On this measurement choice, also see Hosli (2007) and Hosli and Uriot (2008).

4. Empirical Analysis

Due to the fact that our dependent variable, government vote choice, is ordinal, we employ ordinal logistic regression in our statistical analysis.[7] The dependent variable in our study takes on three possible values, ranging from agreement with the Council majority (vote choice 'yes'), to abstaining from voting, and finally, to voting against the Council majority (vote choice 'no'), with the latter option, according to our assumption, indicating the strongest level of dissent. Thus, positive coefficients in our analysis imply that the probability of dissenting -- abstaining or voting 'no' -- increases when the value of the respective independent variable increases, and *vice versa*.

Our analysis is conducted on the basis of three models, as table 1 demonstrates, with each of these models utilizing the same explanatory variables, but a different (sub-)set in terms of observations. Model 1 assesses effects for all member states in the EU-25. By comparison, models 2 and 3 explore differences in Council voting behavior between the 'older' EU states and those who joined in 2004. Accordingly, model 2 examines voting behavior of 'older' EU states, whereas model 3 focuses on the new states that joined in the 2004 enlargement.

[Table 1 about here]

Estimates for model 1 show that only some of the explanatory variables we use have a statistically significant effect on vote choice in the Council. First, during their first two and one-half years as EU members, the new member states have voted negatively or abstained from voting significantly fewer times than the older member states. Thus, our multivariate analysis confirms the result of a more descriptive study covering the same time period (see e.g. Mattila 2008). Second, high public support for their country's EU membership decreases the likelihood of a member state opposing the Council majority (by either abstaining or voting 'no').

Interestingly, in model 1, the vote weight variable, reflecting the size or

[7] Since our data set encompasses the vote choices for 25 EU member states in the post-enlargement phase, we cannot assume observations to be entirely independent from each other. In order to correct for this potential bias in our statistical analysis, we cluster standard errors by legislative acts.

importance of member states, is not statistically significant. By contrast, previous studies analyzing the pre-enlargement period Council roll calls have found this variable to be an important explanatory factor (Mattila 2004).[8] Also the idea that member states' budget positions as net receivers or net contributors to the EU budget could explain their vote choices is not supported in Model 1. Earlier studies have produced mixed results concerning this variable: Hosli (2007) and Hosli and Uriot (2008) find it to be a significant predictor of vote choice, whereas in Mattila's (2004) study, the variable fails to reach statistical significance.

We measure governments' positions on the left-right dimension on the basis of two approaches. The first one simply indicates governments' positions on the left-right policy scale (based on data provided by Benoit and Laver 2006), while the second one is a relative measure: The relative measure reflects the absolute distance between the average left-right policy position in the Council and the government of a given EU member state.[9] The idea motivating this latter measure is fairly simple: the further away a government is from the average position of all other governments, the more likely it is to find itself in disagreement with other Council members. Consequently, this government will be more likely to contest decisions to be taken by the Council. In Model 1, however, only the first variable is significant, indicating that governments located right-of-centre are less likely to contest proposals discussed in the Council than are more leftist governments. This is an interesting finding, because earlier studies have found this relationship to be reverse: before enlargement, rightist governments were found to be the ones dissenting with the majority most frequently. This transition may be due to the fact that since the late 1990s, the 'left-right center of gravity' of the Council has shifted from the left to the right (Hix 2008, 122-124). It is now the left-of-centre governments that find themselves to be in opposition to a Council majority of right-of-centre governments. The alternative left-right variable, measuring the relative position of governments on the left-right policy scale, by comparison, is not statistically significant in Model 1.

As table 1 shows, the presidency dummy in Model 1 is statistically significant, but

[8] The significance of this variable as a predictor, however, is also found to be fairly weak in Hosli and Uriot (2008).

[9] Also see Hosli (2007) and Hosli and Uriot (2008).

only at the $p<0.1$ level. This provides weak support for the hypothesis that member states holding the presidency vote less against proposals than other EU member states. This result is consistent with analyses that find Council presidents being able to use their position to achieve decision outcomes close to their own preferences (e.g. Thomson 2008; Warntjen 2008) implying that countries holding the presidency indeed have fewer incentives to contest proposals in the Council than other EU member states.

In addition to this, the two control variables with less substantial value to our analysis are statistically significant in Model 1: Definitive legislative acts are more often contested than other acts. This may be partly due to the fact that voting in the Council largely serves the purpose of demonstrating opposition to domestic audiences: signaling that one formally objects to final decisions taken by the Council may generate respective media attention. Similarly, the variable reflecting how many other member states are contesting the same decision is significant and has a positive coefficient: governments in the Council are more inclined to formally vote against a proposal or abstain from voting when there are other member states displaying the same vote choice.

When analyzing results for old member states (Model 2) as compared to new EU states (Model 3), new interesting insights materialize. Clearly, several of our explanatory variables have a different effect on governments' voting decisions in a comparison between these two groups. Surprisingly, most of the explanatory variables of substantial interest to our analysis even show different signs, indicating that the direction of the relationship is often reversed when comparing the new member states with the older EU members.

All in all, results given by Model 2 are largely in line with previous studies that assess effects before EU enlargement: governments with domestic publics that are supportive of EU membership are less likely to contest decisions in the Council than are governments facing more Euroskeptic publics. Similarly, large net contributors to the EU budget are more inclined to oppose the majority than are net receivers (with this statistical result being significant at the $p<0.1$ level in our analysis). However, there is one striking difference when comparing our study to earlier findings: In the EU-25, the voting weight variable has a negative sign (again significant at the $p<0.1$ level), showing that smaller member states are more inclined to vote 'no' or abstain than are member

states holding more votes in the Council. Before the 2004 enlargement, larger member states were more likely to contest decisions (Mattila 2004). Interestingly, among the new EU member states, the likelihood of contesting decisions increases with the number of Council votes: Accordingly, the new member states display the same voting patterns as did 'old' members before enlargement, as new, large member states tend to oppose the Council majority most frequently.

Among the new EU member states, the direction of the effects of budget balance and EU-support, surprisingly, is opposite to the direction our statistical analysis discovers for older member states. Within the group of new member states, the larger net receivers are more likely to oppose the Council majority than countries benefiting less from the EU budget. However, one has to bear in mind that all ten new member states are net receivers of the EU budget, implying that the range of this variable is smaller among the new members as compared to the older ones.

The variable 'left-right position' is only significant – in both its absolute and relative versions – within the group of older EU member states: In Model 2, both of our government left-right assessments display statistically significant effects: As in Model 1, left-of-centre governments are more likely to dissent with the Council majority than those located more to the right on this policy scale. Furthermore, the distance from the average EU government as represented in the Council matters: The further away a government is from the average Council position, the more likely it is to vote 'no' or abstain in formal Council voting procedures. These results appear to confirm the existence of a left-right division in the Council (e.g. see Hix 1999), but according to our analysis, only among older member states. It is certainly possible, however, that traditional left-right assessments are less appropriate for new EU member states, in which some elements of the original left-right policy scale seem to be reversed (with formerly communist political parties, located on the left, for example, being more 'authoritarian' than their counterparts on the right of this policy scale).[10] Accordingly, for new EU states, traditional left-right policy positions have no significant effect on voting choice in the Council.

[10] This observation led Gary Marks, Liesbet Hooghe and others to introduce the 'GAL-TAN' policy scale, in which political parties are stretching on the scale from 'Green, Alternative and Libertarian' to 'Traditional, Authoritarian, Nationalist' E.g. see Marks and Steenbergen (2004).

In ordinal logistic regression analysis, the effects of individual variables is difficult to discern from the regression coefficients. Therefore, we graphically demonstrate the effects of independent variables -- government left-right location, member states' budget position as net receivers or net contributors, their number Council votes and domestic support for EU membership – in Figure 1. Based on the results given in Table 1, we calculate expected probabilities for voting 'no' or abstaining separately for old and new EU member states (Models 2 and 3). We utilize the CLARIFY program (see King et al. 2000; Tomz et al. 2001) to calculate estimated values. In these calculations, all independent variables are set to their mean values, except the particular independent variable of interest, which we allow to vary between its minimum and maximum value. However, to facilitate interpretation, we do not distinguish between abstentions and 'no' votes. Accordingly, the lines in the four sub-figures of Figure 1 depict the expected number of contestations -- abstentions plus 'no' votes -- per year by Council governments, given different situations as regards values of the independent variables. In these figures, the straight lines reflect expected annual contestations for the EU's old member states, whereas the dotted lines show the situation for states that joined the EU in 2004.

[Figure 1 about here]

The upper left-hand panel in Figure 1 shows how governments' left-right location affects their vote choice in the Council. The line for new EU states is almost flat, indicating that (relative) government left-right position does not affect their vote choice, confirming results given in Table 1. However, for the older member states, the findings are different: Governments located at the left or the right ends of this policy dimension are more likely to voice their dissent than do governments situated near the Council average. Similarly, leftist governments are most likely to contest decisions in formal Council votes. In fact, left-wing governments are twice as likely to vote 'no' or abstain from voting compared to governments located near the left-right average of the Council.

The upper right panel of Figure 1 shows the effect of member states' budget positions on their vote choices. This figure demonstrates the different behavior of net

receivers within the groups of old and new member states, respectively: Within the group of new member states, large net receivers are almost three times as likely to contest Council decisions as are large net receivers within the group of the EU's older member states. When exploring the effect of the number of Council votes on vote choices – displayed in the lower left panel of Figure 1 -- a similar pattern can be discerned: Among the EU's older member states, the effect of this variable is negative, but almost negligible. By comparison, within the group of the EU's new member states, larger countries are most likely to vote 'no' or abstain.

Finally, the lower right-hand panel of Figure 1 shows how public support for EU membership has opposite effects in the old as compared to new member states: In old EU states, high domestic support for EU membership implies lower levels of explicit dissent in the Council, whereas among the new members, governments with EU-supportive publics are the most likely to vote 'no' or abstain. It is conceivable that public opinion, in new EU states, is at times more supportive of EU membership than are official government positions, increasing the inclination of governments to oppose Council decisions, in spite of favorable public attitudes towards EU membership.

5. Conclusions

What determines voting behavior in the Council of the EU? This paper assesses governments' overall probability to support a majority decision, abstain or vote 'no' in Council decision making since the 2004 EU enlargement. It explores possible systematic factors that may determine governments' vote choice in the Council for this time period. Our paper uses data between 2004 and 2006 for several independent variables, including governments' absolute and relative left-right positioning, domestic support for European integration and net budget states.

The results of the empirical analysis reveal that there are significant differences in voting behavior in the Council when comparing the EU's older with its newer member states. Explanatory variables, at times, even have opposite effects in these two groups of member states.

Government left-right positioning has a significant impact on governments' inclination to oppose the Council majority among the EU's older members, with governments located left-of-center opposing the Council majority more frequently than those located to the right on the left-right policy scale. By comparison, for the group of new EU states, this variable -- absolute and relative left-right positioning -- does not display significant results.

As far as the effect of the size of EU member states is concerned, in the post-2004 phase, there was no inclination for larger, 'old' EU states to oppose the Council majority more frequently than smaller members did; by comparison, within the group of the EU's new members, larger states have a higher propensity to oppose decisions in formal Council voting procedures.

In old member states, net receivers of the EU budget tend to oppose the Council majority less frequently; by comparison – holding the effects of other variables, including country size, constant – within the group of new EU states, net receivers tend to oppose the Council majority more frequently.

Finally, and again somewhat counter-intuitively, within the group of new EU states, countries facing domestic publics that are supportive of their country's EU membership tend to vote 'no' or 'abstain' more frequently than do member states facing more Euroskeptic publics. By comparison, in the EU's older member states, support for EU membership in public opinion is accompanied by a lower propensity to oppose the Council majority.

Our paper assesses the effect of a range of independent variables on Council voting behavior between May 2004 and December 2006. We find evidence for the existence of cleavages in Council voting that confirm divisions found in other studies of EU decision-making, including a left-right and an EU-support division. The time period of our analysis, however, is relatively short to derive general insights as regards the effects of explanatory variables on voting behavior in the Council. Nonetheless, the total sample of voting records since 2004 is considerable.

Due to the overall fairly small number of contested decisions in this institution ('no' votes and abstentions), we do not distinguish between effects in different areas of Council decision-making, such as agriculture, fisheries, the internal market or financial

affairs. Future studies may continue the exploration of cleavages in Council voting after the 2004 enlargement, and possibly differentiate between effects in different substantive areas of Council decision-making.

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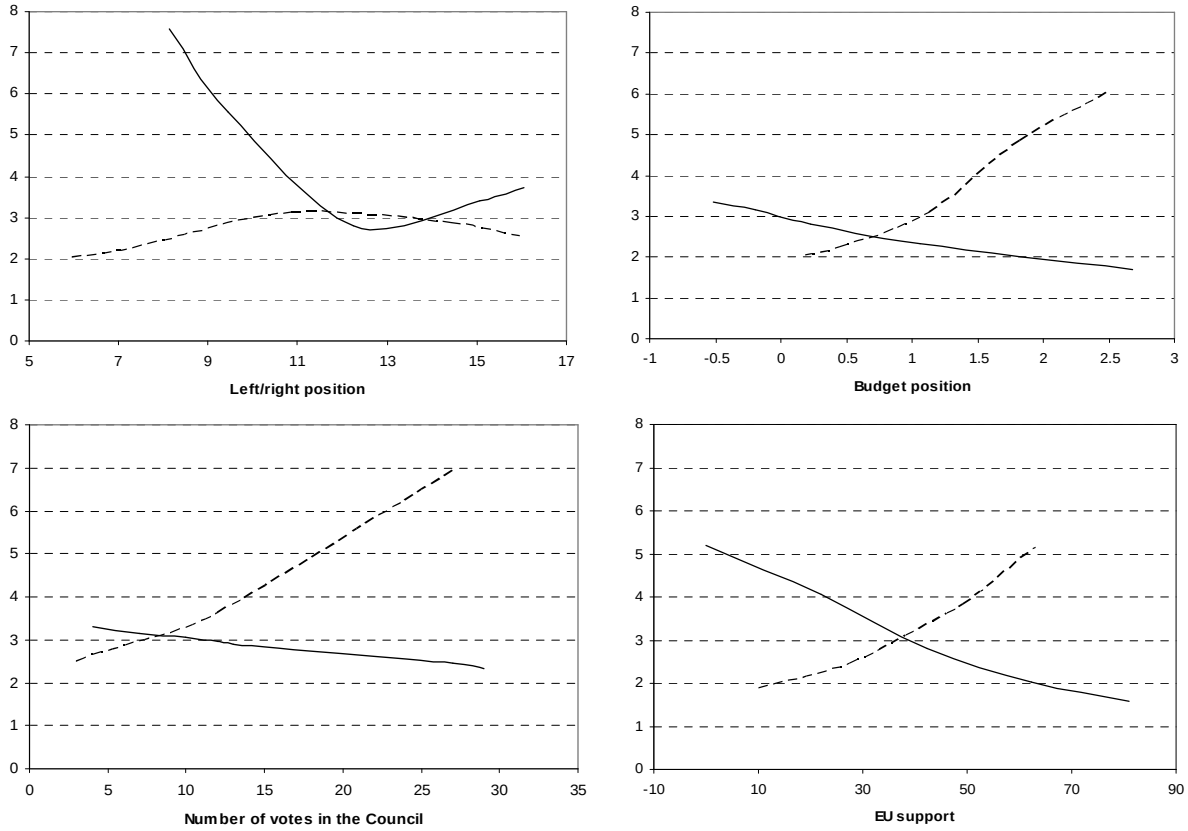
Figure 1: Estimated Number of Annual Contestations by Council Governments from Old as Compared to New EU Member States



Note: 'Old' member states indicated by straight line,' New' member states by dotted line

Table 1: Explaining Voting Behavior in the Council in the EU-25 (Ordinal Logistic Regression Analysis)

	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**
	All member states	Old member states	New member states
New member state	-0.513***	-	-
	(0.171)		
Vote weight	-0.000296	-0.0141*	0.0414***
	(0.00783)	(0.00826)	(0.0148)
Budget balance	-0.0294	-0.241*	0.473***
	(0.0883)	(0.129)	(0.133)
Presidency	-0.500*	-0.555*	-
	(0.295)	(0.296)	
EU support	-0.00934***	-0.0144***	0.0191**
	(0.00305)	(0.00314)	(0.00908)
Left-right position	-0.0465**	-0.111***	0.0168
	(0.0186)	(0.0247)	(0.0329)
Distance from average left-right position	0.0425	0.185***	-0.0810
	(0.0413)	(0.0509)	(0.0798)
Definitive legislative act	0.560***	-0.563***	0.548**
	(0.136)	(0.168)	(0.247)
Other dissenting votes	0.535***	0.527***	0.558***
	(0.0369)	(0.0394)	(0.0453)
Cut 1	3.115***	2.254***	6.092***
	(0.350)	(0.384)	(0.733)
Cut 2	3.794***	2.912***	6.840***
	(0.345)	(0.385)	(0.751)
Observations	33950	20370	13580
Pseudo r-square	0.22	0.21	0.26

Note: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Robust standard errors are given in parentheses.