

# Journal of Contemporary European Research

Volume 11, Issue 3 (2015)

Commentary

## Understanding Politics in the College of European Commissioners: Suggestions for a Research Agenda

**Renke Deckarm** *Oldenburg University*

**Torsten Joerg Selck** *Oldenburg University*

### **Citation**

Deckarm, R. and Joerg Selck, T. (2015). 'Understanding Politics in the College of European Commissioners: Suggestions for a Research Agenda', *Journal of Contemporary European Research*. 11 (3), pp. 296-303.

First published at: [www.jcer.net](http://www.jcer.net)

## Abstract

This commentary discusses the state of the art in the academic literature on politics in the European Commission. We discuss scholarly advancements in the field and sketch out future research opportunities. We argue that principal-agent theory might serve as a useful theoretical device in this area and that more empirical work should focus on the dynamics between appointing Commissioners and the work they do while being in office. More specifically, we suggest analysing Commissioners' speeches with quantitative text analysis. This method is yet unused to extract Commissioners' positions.

## Keywords

European Commissioners; principal-agent theory; quantitative text analysis.

---

Generally, the Commission as the European Union's (EU) executive is well researched. Recently, important contributions with substantial empirical work have been put forward (Ban 2013; Hartlapp, Metz, and Rauh 2014; Kassim et al. 2013; Wille 2013), also focusing on politics and position-formation in the Commission (Osnabrügge 2015; Smith 2014).

Different research questions have previously been addressed. The Commission's role in the policy-making process and its relations to other actors are well researched (see Bailer 2014; Bocquillon and Dobbels 2014; Egeberg, Gornitzka, and Trondal 2014; Egeberg, Trondal, and Vestlund 2014; Klüver 2011 for the most recent results). Very recently, the effects of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure in the 2014 European Parliament (EP) elections are coming into focus, although as yet without clear-cut results on the consequences for the Commission (Dinan 2015; Hobolt 2014). Also, the Commission services have been extensively analysed by scholars (Hooghe 2001, 2005; Kassim et al. 2013; Suvarierol 2008). In addition, substantial work focuses on the behaviour of other EU actors; examples are members of the EP (Hix 2001; Hix, Noury, and Roland 2006; Kreppel and Tsebelis 1999), national experts seconded to the Commission (Egeberg 1996; Trondal 2006; Trondal, Van Den Berg, and Suvarierol 2008), or Council officials and other national representatives (Beyers 2005; Juncos and Pomorska 2006; Lewis 2005).

However, research on some of the most influential actors in the EU polity, namely the individual European Commissioners themselves, has so far been rather scarce. This work will discuss the scholarly advancements made in this field and sketch out some future research opportunities.

### THE COMMISSION IN THE EU POLITY

Christophe Crombez (1997) and Simon Hug (2003) have advanced spatial models of political competition in the EU to show to what extent preferences of agents depend on those of their principals. Crombez argues that member states only appoint Commissions with policy positions close to member states' preferences. Hug develops a model for the case of intergovernmental conferences. He finds that the Commission is a preference outlier only on some issues, since for most problems its position is inside the pareto-optimal space of member state preferences. Delegation of tasks to a supranational actor is regarded as comparatively easy if this actor's preferences are equal to those of her principal. A game theoretical analysis of the effects of treaty changes on Commission appointment and legislative policy-making reveals that the theoretically

possible more radical positions in the Commission are still constrained (Crombez and Hix 2011). That is why the Commission's legislative success still depends on member states rather than internal factors (Bailer 2014). None of these publications considers the preferences of individual Commissioners, but they support the claim that member states influence the positioning of the Commission.

Robert Thomson (2008) asks under what conditions policy positions in international organisations are closer to some member states' positions than to others. He compares the policy positions of EU member states with that of the Commission. Thomson bases his research on principal-agent theory and uses the *Decision Making in the European Union* data set. His finding is that under qualified majority voting, which gives more leeway to the Commission, the Commission position is closer to the position of the responsible Commissioner's country than under unanimity voting. While this indicates the relevance of national ties, Thomson does not demonstrate the causal effects of the nationality of the Commissioner on policy formulation. But his work shows that nationality matters in EU inter-institutional politics.

### ON COMMISSIONERS' BEHAVIOUR

After some early contributions (MacMullen 1996, 1997; Page and Wouters 1994), more recently, there has been a developing focus on European Commissioners. Despite this progress, the decisive research question has not been answered: to what extent and under what circumstances do European Commissioners not behave in the European interest? This section explores this gap in research, while the next section suggests a way to contribute to its closing.

The appointment mechanism is a powerful tool for member states to influence the European Commission. Holger Döring (2007) focuses on the appointment procedures for Commissioners and attempts to show whether their party affiliation and their political importance matter when member states select Commissioners. His analysis is informed by principal-agent theory. He analyses the biographies of all Commissioners between 1958 and 2007 with respect to party affiliation and previous political position. Döring finds that over time previous political importance has become more salient as a selection criterion for member states, whereas party affiliation has not. Principal-agent theory does not serve well to explain the selection of Commissioners by all member states, since he finds substantial differences between countries. Some of these differences can be accounted for by different logics of selection, which an analysis of the Commissioners selected by old and new member states shows (Deckarm and Fietkau 2014). New member states tend to send more independent Commissioners in order to underline their credible commitment to the integration process.

Arndt Wonka (2007) deals with a similar question as Döring in trying to find out which aims governments pursue when selecting Commissioners. Based on a principal-agent understanding he compares the *inclusiveness* and *visibility* of Commissioners, testing for whether they were members of a government party and what kind of political position they held before being appointed. His argument is that the principal tends to select an agent with known and shared preferences. Again, like Döring, Wonka analyses the biographical data of Commissioners, but he reports slightly different results. While he finds that inclusiveness matters, the role of visibility grows over time. Member states thus select more and more high-ranking politicians. Wonka's explanation is that the increasing relevance of EU policies for member states has forced governments to send trusted agents.

The distribution of portfolios follows appointment: Fabio Franchino (2009) reports that the Commissioners' experience, their member states' resources and voting power matter for the portfolio distribution. This underlines the importance of Commissioners' origin, since it is not simply their personal competence which matters in the Commission. Eviola Prifti (2013) analyses whether the most recent version of the EU treaty (as amended by the Treaty of Lisbon) had an effect on the composition of the Commission. By distinguishing between Commissioners' political capital and their technical expertise, she diagnoses a growing politicisation of the Commission. This shows that the trends identified by Döring and Wonka continue and the college of Commissioners has been transformed from a technocratic body into a political one.

Influencing Commissioners' future careers is a way of exercising power. An analysis of Commissioners' post-Commission lobbying careers reveals that the age and portfolio of the Commissioner matter, as well as their party family (left-leaning Commissioners are less likely to lobby) and whether the Commissioner is subject to a code of conduct (Vaubel, Klingen, and Müller 2011). The authors find support both for their *reward* and their *human capital* hypothesis. The former hypothesised that lobby positions are rewards for Commissioners' behaviour, the latter links the accumulated knowledge and competencies to the future career. They do not consider non-lobby post-Commission activities and do not probe further into interactions with Commissioners' behaviour in office. Commissioners' behaviour in the college could thus not only be influenced by their governments, but also by their prospects of a future career in the private sector. Despite being relevant to discussions on the influence of business on European politics, this topic has so far not further been developed.

The analyses of Commissioners' *curricula vitae* thus provided some evidence that Commissioners might not only work in the general EU interests, as they are supposed to do. But how do Commissioners act in the college? Based on organisational theory, Morten Egeberg (2006) identifies four different roles which Commissioners can assume: the collective European Commission role, the portfolio role, the national role and the party political role. He argues that *organisational structure*, *demography*, *locus/arena*, *culture* and *policy sector* influence behaviour. Based on an expert survey, he finds that Commissioners act most frequently in their portfolio roles, followed by Commission role, country role and party role. The organisational setting matters in determining which of the multiple roles Commissioners adopt.

Based on Egeberg's (2006) work, there has been some progress on the issue. Arndt Wonka (2008) enquires about the motivations for Commissioners' decisions. Wonka identifies different groups of factors that influence conflict between Commissioners: these are transnational party, national party, national agency and political portfolio. In his case studies, he finds that the portfolio and the national agent scenario matter, whereas the party scenarios, both national and transnational, do not have any influence. Wonka's results are largely in line with Egeberg's previous findings.

Andy Smith (2003) inquires to what extent individual Commissioners should be regarded as independent political actors and what influences their impact on policy-making. In eight case studies, he finds that individuals and their behaviour matter and that it is not only the institution determining actors' behaviour. Smith also states that the extent to which Commissioners matter for policy-making depends on how much they use latent resources they have at their disposal, the most important being the country of origin and the portfolio; moderated by the President's leadership. This is in line with Franchino's results above: external factors influence the work in the Commission. Smith also finds that previous careers have no significant impact on whether Commissioners become more technocratic or more politicised in their actions. If this claim is right, the selection efforts by governments (which Döring's and Wonka's publication have shown) could to some extent be in vain.

None of the initially mentioned recent monographs explicitly aims at solving the puzzle of Commissioners' behaviour. Also Egeberg concludes in a more recent study that Commissioners do take different roles, but it is still unclear under what circumstances Commissioners take which role (Egeberg 2012). There is thus a substantial research gap at the top of the European Commission.

### **DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Existing research has shown that Commissioners fulfil different roles. Those identified so far can be summarised as either European (driven by portfolio or institutional concerns) or national (be it purely a national or national party driven) role. The literature does not suggest that any of the roles is necessarily dominant and there is plausible support for both types of role behaviour.

So far, empirical work has relied on case studies, analyses of biographical data, expert surveys and analyses of Commission output. None of these sources however allows objective conclusions on the behaviour of individual Commissioners. We propose a novel way to overcome the methodological difficulty of measuring Commissioners' behaviour and argue that quantitative speech analysis is a promising tool able to contribute to academic knowledge on Commissioners. Utilising such techniques assumes that policy positions are revealed in speeches and that analysing Commissioners' speeches allows conclusions on their actual behaviour in office.

An example may illustrate the application. In the second Barroso Commission (2009-14), Máire Geoghegan-Quinn was Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science. During her term, the new Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development, Horizon 2020, was initiated. Geoghegan-Quinn presented the proposal in most member states and the EP. These speeches can be compared, showing whether she used different vocabulary in the different settings. It would be especially interesting to see whether her stated position in Ireland deviates from the position in other member states or in the EP.

Some of the research above suggests a principal-agent relationship between member state governments and Commissioners. In such a framework, the Commissioner is selected to serve the member state's interests and has incentives to do so. Consequently, a crucial test for the framework is a change of the member state government, which frequently happens. The Commissioner could react in two ways. First, the Commissioner could be located closer to another principal, since he or she does not share the preferences of the new government. Second, the possibility of sanctions or rewards leads to an alignment of the Commissioner to the new government. The positions of European Commissioners on their portfolio can be traced over time in order to assess the Commissioners' reaction.

The example of the Slovenian Janez Potocnik, who was Commissioner for Agriculture in the second Barroso Commission (2010-4), serves as an illustration. In his role, he often gave speeches at stakeholder conferences. The Slovenian government changed after the Parliamentary elections in December 2011. In principal-agent terms: the appointing government was Potocnik's original principal and he was their agent in the Commission, but the government left office. Which principal did the agent Potocnik now serve, if at all? Did Potocnik adapt his position and if so, in what way? Did he align his position with the new government's position or did he move to a more European position? Such questions can be answered by comparing his speeches before and after the formation of the new government.

These brief examples highlight possibilities on how to link principal-agent theory and quantitative text analysis in the field of EU politics. To date, more than 11,000 speeches by Commissioners are available online. These speeches offer a rich body of empirical material to be analysed. There have been contributions in EU contexts (Benoit et al. 2005; Proksch and Slapin 2009), but Commissioners' speeches have so far not been systematically analysed.

Both supervised software packages like Wordscores (Laver, Benoit, and Garry 2003) and unsupervised packages like Wordfish (Slapin and Proksch 2008) are able to extract information from Commissioners' speeches along the lines of the two examples presented above.

Commissioners' speeches thus offer a promising data source for further developing research on the European Commission and for understanding decision-making in the College of Commissioners.

\*\*\*

### ***Acknowledgements***

Renke Deckarm thanks the Heinrich Boell Foundation for its funding.

### ***Correspondence Address***

Renke Deckarm, Department of Social Science, Oldenburg University, Ammerlaender Heerstrasse 114-118, 26129 Oldenburg, Germany [renke.deckarm@uni-oldenburg.de]

## **REFERENCES**

Bailer, Stefanie (2014) 'An Agent Dependent on EU Member States? The Determinants of the European Commission's Legislative Success in the European Union'. *Journal of European Integration*, 36 (1): 37-53.

Ban, Carolyn (2013) *Management and Culture in an Enlarged European Commission: From Diversity to Unity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Benoit, Kenneth, Laver, Michael, Arnold, Christine, Pennings, Paul, and Hosli, Madelaine O. (2005) 'Measuring National Delegate Positions at the Convention on the Future of Europe Using Computerized Word Scoring'. *European Union Politics*, 6 (3): 291-313.

Beyers, Jan (2005) 'Multiple embeddedness and socialization in Europe: the case of Council officials'. *International Organization*, 59 (4): 899-936.

- Bocquillon, Pierre, and Dobbels, Mathias (2014) 'An Elephant on the 13th Floor of the Berlaymont? European Council and Commission Relations in Legislative Agenda Setting'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 21 (1): 20-38.
- Crombez, Christophe (1997) 'Policy making and Commission appointment in the European Union'. *Aussenwirtschaft*, 52 (1/2): 63-82.
- Crombez, Christophe, and Hix, Simon (2011) 'Treaty reform and the Commission's appointment and policy-making role in the European Union'. *European Union Politics*, 12 (3): 291-314.
- Deckarm, Renke, and Fietkau, Sebastian (2014) 'The New Member States' Commitment to Independent European Commissioners'. *Poznań University of Economics Review*, 14 (3): 39-57.
- Dinan, Desmond (2015) 'Governance and Institutions: The Year of the Spitzenkandidaten'. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 53 (Supplement S1): 93-107.
- Döring, Holger (2007) 'The Composition of the College of Commissioners'. *European Union Politics*, 8 (2): 207-228.
- Egeberg, Morten (2012) 'Experiments in Supranational Institution-Building: the European Commission as a Laboratory'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 19 (6): 939-950.
- Egeberg, Morten (2006) 'Executive politics as usual: role behaviour and conflict dimensions in the College of European Commissioners'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13 (1): 1-15.
- Egeberg, Morten (1996) 'Organization and Nationality in the European Commission Services'. *Public Administration*, 74: 721-735.
- Egeberg, Morten, Gornitzka, Åse and Trondal, Jarle (2013) 'A Not So Technocratic Executive? Everyday Interaction between the European Parliament and the Commission'. *West European Politics*, 37 (1): 1-18.
- Egeberg, Morten, Trondal, Jarle and Vestlund, Nina M. (2014) 'The quest for order: unravelling the relationship between the European Commission and European Union agencies'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 22 (5): 609-629.
- Franchino, Fabio (2009) 'Experience and the distribution of portfolio payoffs in the European Commission'. *European Journal of Political Research*, 48 (1): 1-30.
- Hartlapp, Miriam, Metz, Julia and Rauh, Christian (2014) *Which Policy for Europe? Power and Conflict inside the European Commission*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hix, Simon (2001) 'Legislative Behaviour and Party Competition in the European Parliament: An Application of Nominate to the EU'. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 39 (4): 663-688.
- Hix, Simon, Noury, Abdul, and Roland, Gérard (2006) 'Dimensions of Politics in the European Parliament'. *American Journal of Political Science*, 50 (2): 494-511.
- Hobolt, Sara B. (2014) 'A vote for the President? The role of Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 European Parliament elections'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 21 (10): 1528-1540.
- Hooghe, Liesbet (2005) 'Several roads lead to international norms, but few via international socialization: a case study of the European Commission'. *International Organization*, 59 (04): 861-898.
- Hooghe, Liesbet (2001) *The European Commission and the Integration of Europe. Images of Governance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hug, Simon (2003) 'Endogenous Preferences and Delegation in the European Union'. *Comparative Political Studies*, 36 (1-2): 41-74.
- Juncos, Ana E., and Pomorska, Karolina (2006) 'Playing the Brussels game: Strategic socialisation in the CFSP Council Working Groups'. *European Integration online Papers* 10 (11). Available online: <http://eiop.or.at/eiop/texte/2006-011a.htm> [accessed 31 August 2015].
- Kassim, Hussein, Peterson, John, Bauer, Michael W., Connolly, Sarah, Dehousse, Renaud, Hooghe, Liesbet and Thompson, Andrew (2013) *The European Commission of the Twenty-First Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Klüver, Heike (2011) 'The contextual nature of lobbying: Explaining lobbying success in the European Union'. *European Union politics*, 12 (4): 483-506.
- Kreppel, Amie, and Tsebelis, George (1999) 'Coalition Formation in the European Parliament'. *Comparative Political Studies*, 32 (8): 933-966.
- Laver, Michael, Benoit, Kenneth and Garry, John (2003) 'Extracting Policy Positions from Political Texts Using Words as Data'. *The American Political Science Review*, 97 (2): 311-331.
- Lewis, Jeffrey (2005) 'The Janus face of Brussels: socialization and everyday decision making in the European Union'. *International Organization*, 59 (04): 937-971.
- MacMullen, Andrew (1997) 'European Commissioner 1952-1995: National Routes to a European Elite'. In N. Nugent (ed.) *At the Heart of the Union. Studies of the European Commission*. Basingstoke: Macmillan: 27-48.
- MacMullen, Andrew (1996) 'Evaluating integration theory: The appointment of European commissioners'. *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 7 (1): 221-243.
- Osnabrügge, Moritz (2015) 'The European Commission and the implementation of its legislative programme'. *European Union politics*, 16 (2): 241-261.
- Page, Edward C., and Wouters, Linda (1994) 'Bureaucratic Politics and Political Leadership in Brussels'. *Public Administration*, 72 (2): 445-459.
- Prifti, Eviola (2013) 'The post-Lisbon Treaty Commissioners (2010-2014). Experts or Politicians?' In M. Chang and J. Monar (eds) *The European Commission in the Post-Lisbon Era of Crises. Between Political Leadership and Policy Management*. Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang: 25-52.
- Proksch, Sven-Oliver, and Slapin, Jonathan B. (2009) 'Position Taking in European Parliament Speeches'. *British Journal of Political Science*, 40: 587-611.
- Slapin, Jonathan B., and Proksch, Sven-Oliver (2008) 'A Scaling Model for Estimating Time-Series Party Positions from Texts'. *American Journal of Political Science*, 52 (3): 705-722.
- Smith, Andy (2014) 'How the European Commission's Policies Are Made: Problematization, Instrumentation and Legitimation'. *Journal of European Integration*, 36 (1): 55-72.
- Smith, Andy (2003) 'Why Commissioners Matter'. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 41 (1): 137-155.
- Suvarierol, Semin (2008) 'Beyond the myth of nationality: Analysing networks within the European Commission'. *West European Politics*, 31 (4): 701-724.
- Thomson, Robert (2008) 'National Actors in International Organizations'. *Comparative Political Studies*, 41 (2): 169-192.
- Trondal, Jarle (2006) 'Governing at the frontier of the European Commission: The case of seconded national officials'. *West European Politics*, 29 (1): 147-160.
- Trondal, Jarle, Van Den Berg, Caspar and Suvarierol, Semin (2008) 'The Compound Machinery of Government: The Case of Seconded Officials in the European Commission'. *Governance*, 21 (2): 253-274.
- Vaubel, Roland, Klingern, Bernhard and Müller, David (2011) 'There is life after the Commission: An empirical analysis of private interest representation by former EU-commissioners, 1981-2009'. *The Review of International Organizations*, 7 (1): 59-80.
- Wille, Anchrit (2013) *The Normalization of the European Commission: Politics and Bureaucracy in the EU Executive*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wonka, Arndt (2007) 'Technocratic and independent? The appointment of European Commissioners and its policy implications'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 14 (2): 169-189.
- Wonka, Arndt (2008) 'Decision-making dynamics in the European Commission: partisan, national or sectoral?'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 15 (8): 1145-63.