

From Summitry to EU Government: An Agenda Formation Perspective on the European Council*

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Abstract

While some observers have claimed that the European Council has become the key institution in European Union politics, others have argued that the Council's role has remained relatively stable over time. In this article, we argue that an analysis of agenda formation dynamics in the European Council may help us understand better how the European Council works and how its role has evolved over time. Building on theories of agenda-setting, we identify two ideal-typical modes of agenda formation: selective targeting and routine monitoring. Based on a comprehensive dataset of coded European Council Conclusions in the period 1975–2011, we show that the substantive content of the European Council agenda shows little change over time. However, in terms of agenda formation dynamics, we find a marked shift toward routine monitoring of issues. This supports the claim that the European Council is developing into the EU's *de facto* government.

Keywords: Agenda-setting; European Union; European Council; Intergovernmentalism; Issue processing

Introduction

Although many observers of the EU (European Union) have claimed that the European Council has become the EU's most prominent centre of political decision-making (e.g. De Schoutheete, 2012; Tallberg, 2008a; Werts, 2008, p. 37), its precise political and institutional role remains difficult to pin down.

On the one hand, a number of EU scholars have identified a rise of intergovernmentalism, which has led the European Council to take up a role as political executive in the EU. This 'new intergovernmentalism' (Bickerton *et al.*, 2015; Puetter, 2012, 2014) would be a consequence of the expansion of EU competencies in the 1990s. According to this line of argument, since the 1990s the EU has expanded its role primarily in areas in which Member States are hesitant to give up powers to supranational institutions, including economic governance, foreign and defence policies, social and employment policies and justice and home affairs. These areas are therefore governed according to an intergovernmental logic, with the European Council as 'the new centre of EU politics' (Puetter, 2013). Fabbrini (2013a, 2013b) has described the development of a 'dual constitution' in the EU, with the European Council acting as the 'political executive' in the EU's intergovernmental regime. This development has been strengthened further by the recent financial crisis, in which the European Council was at the steering wheel of EU responses.

Conversely, other scholars pointed at the striking continuity of the European Council's role. Writing in the wake of the 2004 enlargement, Wessels observed little change over time and argued that 'the most likely prospect [...] is for "business as usual" – or even

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more so', with perhaps only a larger role in terms of constitutional debates (Wessels, 2008, p. 31).

An important point in the debate on the European Council's role and position in the EU centres on its agenda, that is, the issues to which it pays attention. Puetter's argument about the enhanced role of the European Council under the 'new intergovernmentalism' is underpinned by the observation that the European Council agenda has broadened over the past decades to cover the new areas included in the EU framework in the 1990s. Based on data from the period 1992–2012, Puetter (2013, pp. 6–7; 2014) argues that these new areas account for the larger role of the European Council and have come to dominate the European Council agenda. As a result, 'European Council meetings are watched increasingly closely in the capitals and other EU decision-making institutions for the impact they have on day-to-day policymaking' (Puetter, 2013, p. 2).

By contrast, in comparing the European Council agenda in the period 2004–7 to that in the mid-1970s, Wessels claims that 'the items on the agenda have not changed to a significant degree'. Hence, a 'high degree of continuity' can be observed 'with regard to issues on the agenda' (Wessels, 2008, p. 20).

In this article, we take a closer look at these claims by systematically analysing the European Council agenda over the period 1975–2011. We look not only at the content of the agenda (the issues the European Council deals with) but also at the way in which attention is distributed across issues. The most influential empirical studies are based on analyses of the content of the European agenda (Puetter, 2014; Wessels, 2008). To understand the role of the European Council, however, it is also necessary to analyse the way in which attention is distributed across and shifts between issues. Such an analysis gives us better insight into the extent to which the European Council has become involved in 'daily policy-making' and has become the EU's (de facto) 'political executive'.

In the next section, we develop a theoretical framework on agenda formation in the European Council. Based on the literature on agenda-setting under conditions of serial issue-processing, we present two ideal-typical modes of agenda formation in the European Council: selective targeting and routine monitoring. Then we introduce the dataset that we use to study the European Council agenda. Subsequently, we analyse the European Council agenda data for the period 1975–2011. In terms of content, the European Council agenda shows little change over time. However, in terms of the modes of agenda formation, one can observe a marked shift toward routine monitoring of issues. In the final section, we draw a number of conclusions and relate them to the debate on the role of the European Council within the EU.

I. Two Modes of Agenda Formation in the European Council

The Importance of Understanding Agenda Formation

In recent decades, the European Council has received increasing scholarly attention. Most studies have focused on the European Council's institutional characteristics (Bulmer, 1996; Bulmer and Wessels, 1987; De Schoutheete, 2012; Hayes-Renshaw *et al.*, 2006; Kirchner, 1992; Werts, 2008). These studies have emphasized its central policy-making role (De Schoutheete, 2012; Puetter, 2012; De Schoutheete and Wallace 2002), in spite of its informal character and limited administrative resources (Werts, 2008).

In a second strand of literature, the ‘constantly evolving body’ (Foret, 2014) has been the object of studies tracing its evolution in the broader context of the transformation of the EU as a political system (Werts, 2008; Wessels, 2012). More recently, institutional studies have focused on the symbolic dimension of European Council meetings (Foret, 2014), its evolution toward a ‘more collective and supranational apparatus’ (Fernandez Pasarin, 2014: 106; cf. Lewis, 2003) and its role within the EU’s system of ‘compound representation’ (Lord, 2014).

A third line of research has analysed bargaining processes between Member States in the European Council (Tallberg, 2006, 2008a; Tallberg and Johansson, 2008), with special attention to (and mixed evidence on) the role of the presidency (Alexandrova and Timmermans, 2013; Batory and Puetter, 2013; Elgström 2012; Jensen and Nedergaard, 2014; Niemann and Mak 2010; Tallberg, 2003; 2004; 2008b; Thomson, 2008).

While these contributions highlight important elements of the role of the European Council within the larger EU political system and its internal functioning, much less attention has been devoted to how this institution manages its policy agenda. With few exceptions (Bulmer and Wessels, 1987; Puetter, 2014; Wessels, 2008), scholars and practitioners have mostly provided detailed reconstructions of the outcome of specific meetings of the European Council (Werts, 2008). Although these are important for understanding the European Council’s impact on specific policy issues, the debate about the role of the European Council can benefit from looking at the way in which its policy agenda is formed.

The argument that the European Council has become (or is in the process of becoming) the EU’s centre of power, which increasingly deals with day-to-day policy-making, has important implications for the institution’s agenda. As a top political body, the European Council presents an example of serial processing in which topics are addressed a few at a time (Simon, 1985; Jones, 1994; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). This stands in contrast to systems of parallel processing, in which a range of bodies deal with different issues alongside each other, as is the case, for instance, in the Council of Ministers’ different formations or the Directorates-General of the European Commission.

Compared to these institutions of parallel processing, the European Council has long lacked any specialized sub-formations and dealt with each issue in plenary, taking decisions by consensus. More recently, particularly after the Seville meeting of 2002, the European Council’s internal workings and its relationship with lower-level bodies were reformed to increase its capacity to process problems (De Schoutheete, 2012, p. 43; Werts, 2008, p. 64). Internal reforms included a more standardized process of drafting Conclusions; a more prominent role for the presidency (that culminated in the introduction of the ‘trio presidency’ in 2007 and the permanent presidency in 2009); and decentralized decision-making in bi- or mini-lateral ‘confessionals’ (Werts, 2008, p. 204). Externally, the European Council pursued improved relationships with other EU institutions, particularly the Foreign Affairs Council of Ministers (De Schoutheete and Wallace, 2002). In response to the financial crisis, the European Council’s processing capacity was strengthened further, particularly in euro-area governance, through the institutionalization of a deep network of administrative officials.

Although the European Council is developing ‘greater flexibility in agenda-setting’ (Puetter, 2014, p. 145), it is still an institution that mostly processes issues separately and consecutively. Serial processing is typical of what Baumgartner and Jones (1993, p. 21) have called ‘macro-political’ institutions. Macro-political institutions such as the

Presidency in the US or the full cabinet in parliamentary systems do not specialize in one policy domain but may take up any issue considered important. This kind of information processing thus also involves setting priorities: when some issues receive attention, others must wait for their turn.

The constraints imposed by serial processing imply that at any given moment the European Council can only focus on a limited number of issues, while ignoring (at least temporarily) other matters. These constraints are particularly pressing if a body wants to play an 'executive' role and be involved in 'daily policy-making', as some claim the European Council now does, because such a role requires that European Council keeps tabs on different issues at the same time. Dynamics of agenda formation are therefore a crucial reflection of, and precondition for, the kind of role the European Council plays in EU politics.

Two Modes of Agenda Formation

In principle, an institution working under conditions of serial processing can adopt two modes of operation. One mode is a focus on the 'hot topics' of the day, dealing with the most politically salient and contentious issues, and dropping them once other issues command more attention. In this mode, which we will call *selective targeting*, the European Council moves from one issue to the next as it selectively intervenes in issue areas that are at the top of the EU's agenda. This implies that the European Council agenda contains relatively few issues at any given point in time, attention is concentrated on an even smaller subset of them and turnover between issues is high, as issues are replaced by other issues after a brief period of focused attention.

A second possible mode of operation is *routine monitoring*, in which the European Council gives more sustained attention to a range of issues to keep tabs on them. Here, attention is less intensively focused on single issues, but is also more stable and recurring. This leads to a pattern of issues returning to the agenda over more extended periods of time, and attention spread more evenly across issues. Compared to selective targeting, an agenda characterized by routine monitoring contains a wider range of issues, attention is more fragmented across them and turnover between issues is smaller. This second mode thus involves less intense competition for priority.

The distinction between selective targeting and routine monitoring resembles the distinction made in the principal agent literature between 'fire alarm' and 'police patrol' modes of bureaucratic oversight (McCubbins and Schwartz, 1984). These concepts also centre on the distinction between focused, targeted intervention (fire alarm) and more routine types of monitoring (police patrol). The trade-offs in terms of agenda space are the same as can be found in the European Council, even though the oversight of (bureaucratic) agents only forms part of the European Council's activities. Arguably, then, the choice between focused and dispersed attention is also relevant for other types of issues which are not linked to bureaucratic oversight. For this reason, the concepts of fire alarm and police patrol have been used to study news coverage by mass media (Bennett, 2003; Boydston, 2013; Zaller, 2003) and can also be applied to the distribution of attention in political bodies such as the European Council.

The occurrence of these two modes of operation is directly relevant to the debate on the development of the European Council's role within the EU. If the claims about the

European Council as a political executive at the centre of the EU's new inter-governmentalism are correct, we may expect the European Council's mode of operation to have developed away from selective targeting toward routine monitoring. The mode of operation can be seen, then, as a reflection of and precondition for the role the European Council is playing. If the European Council has indeed developed into a 'government', which deals in quite some detail with a wide range of issues, this should be reflected in its agenda and its agenda dynamics thus should have developed toward routine monitoring. In this way, a study of *agenda dynamics* can contribute to our understanding of the *role of the European Council* within the EU's political system. The existing literature, however, points in different directions in this regard.

Selective Targeting and Routine Monitoring: Mixed Expectations

As we saw in the discussion of the literature on the evolving role of the European Council, an argument can be made for either mode as the prevailing mode of operation. On the one hand, as the EU's institution of 'high politics' par excellence (Peterson, 1995; Foret and Rittelmeyer, 2014), the European Council is likely to devote attention only to the most pressing issues, and thus set clear priorities. The same holds for its role as 'arbitrator' in the case that decision-making in the Council of Ministers is stalemated (De Schoutheete, 2012; Wessels, 2008). Issues that come onto the European Council agenda for that reason will normally only be on the agenda briefly, to be dropped after agreement has been reached and the matter is delegated. In addition, scholars of the European Council claim that its agenda is to a significant extent dictated by external events, so that it often seems to take a 'problem-by-problem approach' (Werts, 2008, p. 179). This resembles the notion of 'event-driven' attention shifts described by scholars of information processing (Jones, 1994, p. 28; cf. Puetter, 2014, p. 43). Similarly, since the European Council was designed to facilitate informal 'chats around the fireside' between political leaders (Van Grinsven, 2003, p. 16), it was not equipped with the extensive administrative support needed to process large sets of issues. All these considerations would imply a prevailing pattern of selective targeting.

On the other hand, recent work on the European Council agenda found that the distribution of attention across policy topics over time shows a waving pattern of expansion and contraction, in which alternation occurs between periods of fragmentation (with attention spread across a larger set of issues on the agenda) and concentration (with a focus on fewer issues) (Alexandrova *et al.*, 2012). Such waves occur within a general trend toward more fragmented attention to issues on the agenda, which indicates that the European Council manages a larger and broader agenda, reflecting the EU's growing remit and set of policy tasks (cf. Alesina *et al.*, 2005). As the EU has taken up more issues, so has the European Council (and vice versa). This suggests a routine monitoring mode of operation.

Thus, existing research does not offer conclusive evidence on the two modes of operation within the European Council, as empirical evidence offers support for both. This suggests that the European Council may alternate between them. However, it is not clear how this actually happens. Has the European Council evolved more toward one or the other mode of operation? And what are the effects on the empirical pattern of agenda change and priority setting? It is to these empirical questions that we now turn.

II. A Quantitative Approach to Studying European Council Agenda Dynamics

To analyse agenda-setting dynamics in the European Council, we use a dataset of all European Council Conclusions published in the period between March 1975 – when the European Council first issued Conclusions after its meeting – and December 2011 (Alexandrova et al., 2014a). Council Conclusions are policy documents issued after the meetings of the European Council, summarizing the topics that have been discussed and the position of the European Council on those topics. Conclusions vary in length (ranging from a few hundred to more than 30,000 words per document), frequency (from one to five documents per year) and content. However, they are broadly comparable as they all point to the same underlying content, i.e. the topics on the agenda of single Council meetings.

Two qualifications are in order. First, the dataset we use only includes meetings of the full European Council. In addition, the heads of state and government of the eurozone member states also meet to discuss issues relating specifically to the euro. This development in itself can be seen as an indication of an increase in intergovernmental governance in this relatively new area of EU activity. However, the argument about the new role of the European Council goes beyond EMU alone and relates to its overall role and operation. This calls for an analysis of the agenda of the full European Council, even if it needs to be kept in mind that this does not cover all activities of (members of) the European Council. Second, the dataset excludes those meetings after which no Conclusions were published, thus covering 120 out of the 147 meetings held in the period analysed. However, as we discuss below, this does not affect the substance of our findings.

The unit of analysis of the dataset is the quasi-sentence, that is, each part of a sentence with a discernible policy content. Each quasi-sentence was coded based on an EU-adapted version of the codebook of the CAP (Comparative Agendas Project). The EU codebook lists 228 policy topic codes, aggregated under 21 major topics. Major topics include such broad policy domains as the economy, environment, migration or foreign affairs. Minor topics include more detailed issues within policy domains. For instance, major topic 1, economy, includes such subtopics as monetary issues, budget and debt and inflation rate, while major topic 7, environment, includes inter alia waste disposal, pesticides and global warming. The coding output is a dataset of 120 Council Conclusions and 42,350 quasi-sentences coded by their policy content. Details on the dataset and the codebook used in compiling it can be found in Alexandrova et al. (2014b).

We analyse data at the level of subtopics, as they come closest to individual issues (John and Bevan, 2012). The agenda is analysed by semesters (January–June and July–December), for two reasons. First, until December 2009, the presidency of the European Council rotated between Member States per semester. Each presidency may try to uphold its own priorities on the agenda (Werts, 2008), though whether agendas were actually reset semester after semester is an empirical question which has met with mixed evidence (Alexandrova and Timmermans, 2013; Elgström, 2012; Niemann and Mak, 2010; Tallberg, 2003). Second, semesters can be seen as reasonable time frames within which the European Council agenda is determined. Single meetings within each semester may focus more on some set of issues, but this is often done in the knowledge that other issues can be dealt with in a subsequent meeting. This type of foresight probably does not extend to an entire year, as future agendas are difficult to predict, but it can reasonably be assumed to cover a six-month period.

Our analysis proceeds in two steps. First, we determine the content of the European Council's agenda over time. This allows us to assess the claim that the expansion of the European Council's agenda has mainly been in newer, intergovernmental policy areas against the argument that issues on the European Council agenda have essentially remained the same. Then we look at three other features of agenda formation in the European Council: (1) the policy scope of the agenda, (2) concentration or fragmentation of attention to issues and (3) the level of instability of attention to issues on the agenda. Taken together, these three indicators allow us to differentiate between the two modes of agenda formation distinguished above.

To assess agenda scope, we simply count the total number of subtopics included in the agenda in each semester. To analyse the level of concentration or fragmentation we use Shannon's H , a measure of information entropy.¹ This measure has been used to observe concentration and fragmentation of attention (or 'content diversity') in policy agendas (e.g. Alexandrova *et al.*, 2012, 2014; Baumgartner and Jones, 2015; Jennings *et al.*, 2011; cf. Boydston *et al.*, 2014 for a review and discussion). Entropy can range between 0, which indicates that the agenda of the European Council is entirely concentrated on a single issue, and a maximum value dependent on the total number of issues. With our codebook containing 228 subtopics, maximum entropy equals 5.43, a value that would represent an extremely fragmented agenda with attention equally distributed across all policy issues.

Finally, to analyse instability of the agenda we need a measure of the degree to which the policy content of the agenda in one semester differs from the content of the previous semester. To measure this, we use a modified version of the issue convergence measure developed by Sigelman and Buell (2004), which summarizes in a single indicator the degree of overlap of policy priorities between distinct agendas. Rather than to the agendas of different actors, we apply it to consecutive agendas (cf. Mortensen *et al.*, 2011) of the European Council. Moreover, since our aim is to assess change rather than stability of the agenda, we reverse the index.² In our analysis, a value of 0 indicates perfect overlap (stability) between agendas, with no changes at all in attention to single topics, while a value of 1 signifies a completely new agenda, and thus maximum instability in attention to policy topics. In this way, a value of, for example, 0.6 indicates that 60 per cent of the agenda is different from the agenda of the previous semester.

Taken together, the three measures allow us to capture the mode of operation of the European Council. Under selective targeting, the agenda will have a *narrow scope*, attention will be *highly concentrated* on a few topics and there will be a *high degree of instability* from one semester to the next. Growing scope and fragmentation are still compatible with selective targeting if they are associated with high instability, thus showing

¹ The H-Statistic is calculated by the following formula:

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

where $p(x_i)$ is the probability function of an outcome x_i (i being an 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.

² The (reverse) Sigelman/Buell index is measured as follows: $1 - \left(\sum_{i=1}^n |EC_{t0} - EC_{t-1}| \right) / 2$ where EC_{t0} and EC_{t-1} are the relative share of total attention devoted to a particular issue in the European Council Agenda in two consecutive semesters, and the absolute differences between them are summed over all n of the potential issues.

widely different attention patterns from one semester to the next. By contrast, under routine monitoring, the agenda will have a *broad policy scope*, attention will be *fragmented* across issues and content will be *more stable* over time.

Selective targeting and routine monitoring are ideal-typical concepts, which in their pure forms can be thought of as the extremes on a continuum that runs from one to the other. The actual mode of operation of the European Council is likely to lie somewhere in between these two extremes and to exhibit elements of both. Since there are no absolute thresholds for determining whether the actual mode of operation is ‘predominantly’ selective targeting or routine monitoring, the two concepts will be used comparatively. Hence, in the empirical analysis, we seek to determine whether the mode of operation has developed over time toward one or the other ideal-typical form. This, in turn, will tell us more about the way in which the European Council has evolved.

III. Analysing the European Council Agenda

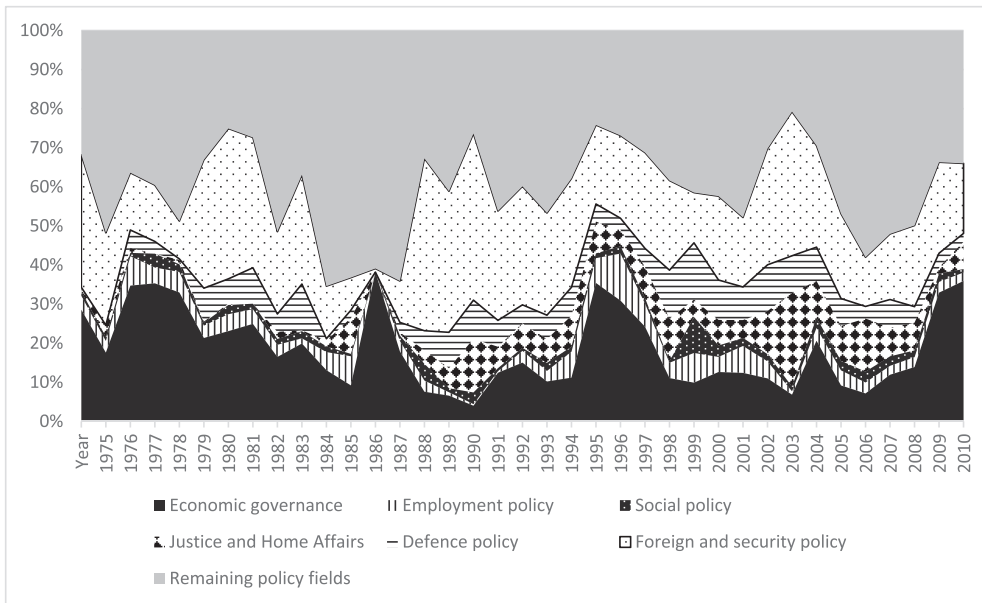
In this section, we analyse the content, scope, fragmentation and instability of the European Council agenda quantitatively over the entire period observed, between 1975 and 2011. We start by looking at the content of the agenda. An important element of the argument about the changing role of the European Council concerned the alleged shift of the institution’s agenda to intergovernmental issue areas. Puetter identifies these areas as ‘economic governance, foreign, security and defence policy, justice and home affairs, and the coordination of social and employment policies’ (Puetter, 2014, p. 92). In our topic-coding scheme, these areas correspond with the major topics ‘economic governance’, ‘employment policy’, ‘social policy’, ‘defence policy’, ‘foreign and security policy’, ‘immigration’ and ‘law and crime’ (which we merged into a single ‘justice and home affairs’ category). Figure 1 traces attention for these six areas over time, as a share of the overall policy agenda of the European Council.

As Figure 1 shows, overall attention to these six issue areas has not consistently changed over time. Although each of the areas, as well as the six areas taken together, show considerable fluctuations over time, there is no consistent shift toward more attention for them. This is also borne out by the underlying figures. Whereas average attention to these five issue areas in the entire period 1975–2011 is 59.1 per cent, it is 61.5 per cent in the period 1993–2011 (taking the Treaty of Maastricht as the starting point) and even a bit lower, at 59.6 per cent, in the period 1999–2011 (taking the Treaty of Amsterdam as the starting point). The relative attention to each of the six intergovernmental issue areas separately does not shift over time either. The most pronounced change can be seen in the area of justice and home affairs, which attracted 8.3 per cent of attention in the 1993–2011 period, against 5.5 per cent in the entire 1975–2011 period.

It may well be, of course, that the type of attention given by the European Council has changed over time or that the decisions taken by the European Council in these areas have become more consequential. Yet this is not reflected in the content of the European Council agenda. In fact, in the period 1999–2011 there is even a slight increase in attention to all *other* policy areas rather than to the six intergovernmental themes, even despite the surge in attention for economic governance issues following the 2008 credit crunch.

The next step, then, is to look further at the dynamics of agenda formation and change, apart from the specific content of the agenda. In the remainder of this section, therefore,

Figure 1: Attention to Intergovernmental Policy Fields, 1975–2011



we focus on the scope, fragmentation and instability of the European Council agenda. We first look at each of these measures separately to explore the related patterns. Then we combine them to assess whether we can observe a development toward the selective targeting or routine monitoring mode in European Council agenda-setting.

To begin with scope, Figure 2 shows the number of issues on the European Council agenda in each semester. The general trend is clearly one of an expanding scope of the policy agenda. Early semesters had comparatively small agendas, with just some 20 issues discussed in a half-year period. The agenda was occasionally stretched to include more issues, but the number of topics discussed in one semester never went beyond some 70. A change in agenda scope occurred between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, with a clear trend toward a broader agenda consistent with the expanding scope of EU competencies. The number of issues included in the agenda increased to a maximum of some 140.³ From the mid-1990s, we see oscillations in agenda scope, pointing to an alternation between narrower and broader policy agendas of the European Council. In the most recent years, the trend is toward a narrowing scope, down to the level of the early 1990s just before the Treaty of Maastricht (1992).

Moving to the level of concentration of the agenda, Figure 3 shows the fragmentation of attention in the period 1975–2011. Entropy as a measure incorporates two distinct dimensions: the distribution of attention among issues and the number of issues included in the agenda. As a result, one and the same entropy value may signify different

³ The limit to agenda scope depends on the number of topics included in the codebook. In our case, the maximum number of topics is 228.

Figure 2: Number of Issues on the European Council’s Agenda per Semester (Semesters 1–74, 1975–2011)

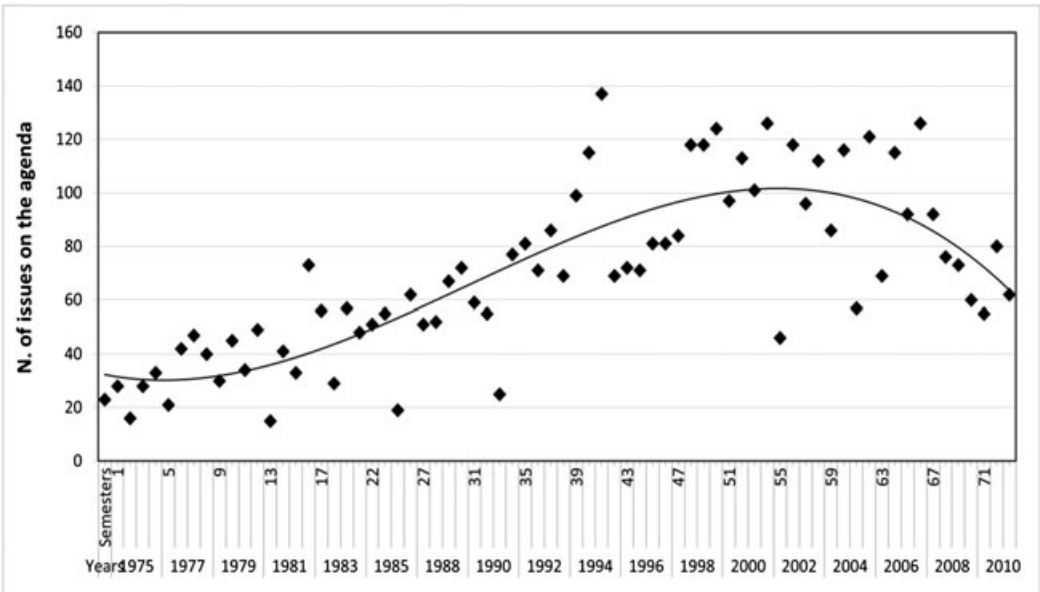


Figure 3: Normalized and Conditional Entropy of the European Council Agenda, per Semester (Semesters 1–74, 1975–2011)



underlying patterns of attention.⁴ This may bias the measure in a context of expanding agenda scope, as is the case for the European Council.

To address this problem, we normalize entropy scores in two different ways. First, to make the measure range between 0 (full agenda concentration) and 1 (full fragmentation), we divide each value by the maximum theoretical value it would take if all issues of the codebook received equal coverage (a value of 5.43). Then, we normalize entropy scores, dividing them by the maximum value each of them would take if all issues *actually included in the agenda in that semester* received the same amount of attention. Below, we refer to this measure as *conditional entropy*, because it is conditional on the number of issues actually on the European Council agenda. This index also ranges between 0 and 1, but a conditional entropy value of 1 indicates that attention is equally spread across all issues which are on the agenda, rather than across all possible issues.

The solid line depicts normalized entropy per semester, and shows a clear overall trend toward higher entropy. This indicates an increasing fragmentation of attention, moving from a focus on a limited number of issues and progressively stretching to achieve a more encompassing coverage of diverse policy topics, with attention more evenly spread across them. The conditional entropy score (dotted line), in turn – which is less directly affected by the increasing competencies of the EU and depends more on the stretching of attention across issues on the agenda of single semesters – is means-reverting and appears to vary less over time. This is consistent with recent comparative findings on the policy agendas of national governments (Jennings *et al.*, 2011).

As the EU has increased its remit, the European Council is processing a larger number of issues, with a more fragmented agenda over time. This serial processing institution has thus expanded its attention capacity, and it has done this by alternating semesters of attention concentrated on fewer issues with semesters in which a broader range of issues receive more balanced portions of attention. When we use a measure of conditional entropy to limit the bias of expanding agenda scope, the increasing fragmentation trend disappears, and we also see less fluctuation between agenda concentration and fragmentation. This indicates that, given the number of issues that enter the agenda, the European Council tends to distribute its attention between them in a ‘similarly uneven’ way.

The gradual broadening and fragmentation of the European Council agenda over time may have two consequences for the dynamics of agenda change, depending on whether they are associated with stability or change in the content of the agenda. In one scenario, the expansion of the EU’s remit may have led the European Council to work more according to a routine monitoring mode. Faced with a broader array of topics, the European Council stretches its attention across a wide range of recurring issues. If this is the case, greater fragmentation will be associated with more stability in the content of the agenda.

In the other scenario, the broadening policy remit may have forced the European Council to target issues more selectively, because the number of potential issues has simply grown too large to be effectively monitored by a single institution. In this case, an increase in fragmentation will be associated with rising agenda instability, as the European Council must manage shifts between items in an expanding set of issues. It is important,

⁴ For instance, an agenda that includes 20 issues, two of which cover one third of the agenda, may have the same entropy value as an agenda that includes more than 50 issues, two of which covering half of the agenda. This was actually the case of the agenda of the European Council in semester 6 (in 1977) and semester 72 (in 2010).

therefore, to relate developments in the level of fragmentation in the European Council agenda to the degree of instability of its content. In this way, it is possible to learn more about of the type of shift (if any) taking place between the two modes of operation.

Figure 4 shows the development of instability of the European Council agenda between semesters. A score of 1 means that the agenda at point t_1 includes completely different issues from the previous agenda at point t_0 . A score of 0 indicates that two successive semester agendas are identical in issue composition. On average, the European Council agenda shows a level of instability of .48, indicating that about half of the agenda in a given semester differs from the previous one. There is a trend toward more stability over the entire 35-year period. On average, major agenda overhauls become less frequent. However, this overall trend hides large differences, with scores ranging from considerable stability (.30) to high instability (sometimes with a score of more than .70).

To further explore the relationship between fragmentation and instability, Figure 5 combines data on both.⁵ Against the increasing entropy over time (largely as a result of the EU's expanding remit), average agenda instability went down. This is consistent with the first scenario outlined above – a development toward routine monitoring – and indicates that the European Council kept the content of the agenda relatively stable while also dealing with a broader and more diverse set of issues.

As shown in Table 1, the correlation between instability and normalized entropy is -0.29 . On closer inspection, however, this correlation is produced largely by the high correlation in the specific period between the Single European Act of 1986 and the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997. In the years before and after, the correlation is either absent or slightly positive, and not significant. Thus, overall, there is no conclusive evidence about the general relationship between entropy and agenda instability. The strong negative correlation for the period 1986–97 points to a dynamic in EU agenda-setting, however, which happened during the largest increase in policy-making competencies. As this expansion took place, the European Council agenda stabilized in order to effectively address the issues within its remit. As a result, these years showed a more dispersed but also stabilizing policy agenda. Afterwards, from the late 1990s on, mostly short periods of stability alternated with years of larger changes in agenda composition.

Taken together, the measures of agenda scope, entropy and instability contribute to an understanding of the way in which agenda formation in the European Council happens. As the EU has expanded (and is still expanding) its policy remit, the role of the European Council in agenda-setting has become more pronounced. The agenda of this institution has grown in scope to accommodate a wider variety of issues. In this process, attention has become more fragmented to cover more issues. When we consider the growing set of issues entering the European Council agenda, we still observe fragmentation of attention, but rather than an upward trend, we see one of alternation between concentration and fragmentation across a relatively constant means.

The evolution of agenda scope and fragmentation of attention is consistent with the view of the European Council as an institution which progressively stretches its agenda management capacity to engage in routine monitoring of the growing set of policy issues calling its attention. But this method of information processing alternates with selective

⁵ Since we are interested in fragmentation of attention against a context of broadening agenda scope, here we use normalized rather than conditional entropy.

Figure 4: Instability in the European Council agenda, between semesters (Semesters 2–74, 1975–2011)

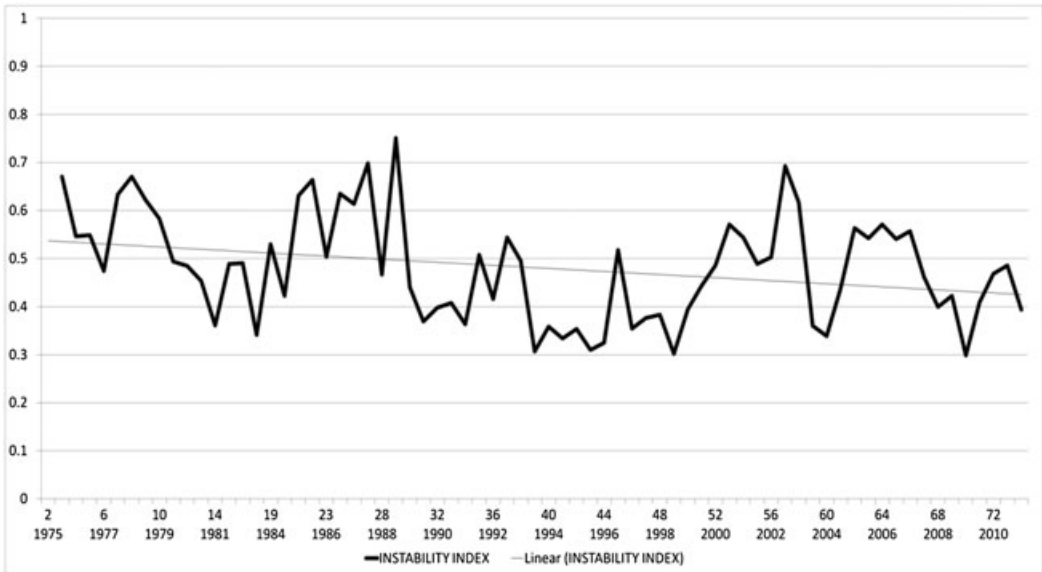


Figure 5: Entropy and Instability of the European Council Agenda, per Semester (Semesters 1–74, 1975–2010)

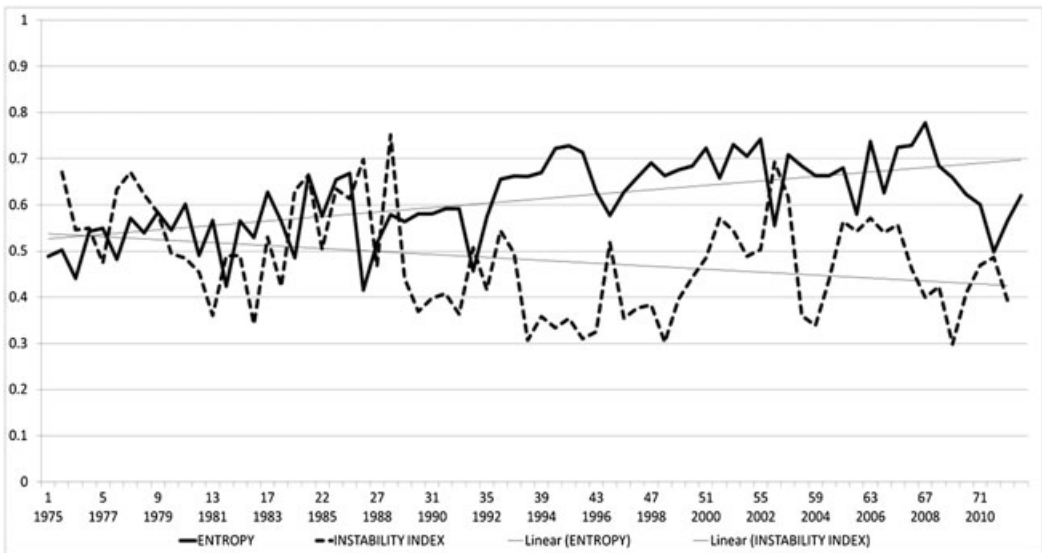


Table 1: Average Instability, Average Entropy, and Correlation between Entropy and Instability

	<i>Average instability (standard deviation)</i>	<i>Average entropy (standard deviation)</i>	<i>Pearson correlation (two-tailed significance)</i>
Whole period (1975–2011)	0.48 (0.11)	0.61 (0.08)	–0.29* (0.013)
Period 1 (1975–85)	0.54 (0.10)	0.55 (0.07)	0.17 (0.451)
Period 2 (1986–97)	0.42 (0.11)	0.62 (0.08)	–0.60** (0.002)
Period 3 (1998–2011)	0.48 (0.09)	0.66 (0.07)	–0.03 (0.895)

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed) ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

targeting of those issues that involve a sense of urgency and require the European Council to be promptly responsive.

Conclusion

Our analysis shows a development of the European Council's mode of operation from selective targeting toward routine monitoring, with occasional temporary shifts 'back' to selective targeting. To organize the dual requirement of responding to major events and crises and more routinely governing the EU's decision-making process, the European Council has increased its agenda management capacity. This finding is indicative both of the development of the EU, which has become active in an increasing number of issue areas that command attention, and of the changing role of the European Council, involved in decision-making on a wider range of issues within the EU. Being 'not just an institution' but an 'essential locus of power' (De Schoutheete 2012, p. 53), the European Council can adapt to the changing context.

These findings support the argument made by Fabbrini and Puetter that the European Council has developed into the EU's 'political executive', which is increasingly engaged in daily policy-making. As a result, in terms of its mode of operation the European Council has already developed into the EU's 'government', which some would like it to also be in more formal terms. Unlike Puetter, however, we do not find consistent evidence for a rise of attention in the newer, intergovernmental policy areas. Rather, the broadening of the agenda has occurred across the whole range of issues, and the change in the European Council's agenda is most visible in its increasing fragmentation and stability.

Important though agenda formation is, the limitations of our analysis also need to be acknowledged. First, as noted in our methods section, our analysis does not cover meetings of the heads of state and government of the eurozone countries. As a result, our analysis does not take into account some of the specific developments that have taken place around the EMU. However, our analysis of the full European Council shows a marked development toward a more central, 'governmental' role for the European Council, which complements accounts emphasizing the European Council's role in the aftermath of the financial crisis.

Second, based on agenda data alone, we cannot determine the content of European Council decisions and statements, nor the impact they have on other EU institutions. For a fuller understanding of the role of the European Council within the EU's institutional framework, these questions need to be addressed in systematic research. By showing how agenda formation and the distribution of attention across issues has evolved in the European Council, however, our contribution identifies one important piece of this puzzle.

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