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The political College of Commissioners: increased friction or open to change? Assessing presidentialisation in and parliamentarisation of the College

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Citation

Hellebrand, T. (2021). *The political College of Commissioners: increased friction or open to change?: Assessing presidentialisation in and parliamentarisation of the College*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3182419>

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Running head: the political College: increased friction or open to change?

‘The political College of Commissioners: increased friction or open to change’?

Assessing presidentialisation in and parliamentarisation of the College

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Science (MSc.) in Public Administration

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Date: 02 May 2021

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Word count: 29411

THE POLITICAL COLLEGE: INCREASED FRICTION OR OPEN TO CHANGE?

Abstract

Importance

This thesis covers the College of Commissioners of the EU to shed light on empirical realities in the responsiveness of the EU's political executive in terms of attention to policy issues in the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory framework.

Objective

The goal is to find when and to what extent the College is open to change or to inertia. Presidentialisation and parliamentarisation are suspected to have changed the dynamics in the EU policy-system. Previous work has assumed a reduced role of the Parliament and ignored institutional cycles in the College.

Design-setting

The thesis innovates through a further development of the EU-Comparative Agendas Project by testing hypotheses by synthesising and operationalising the concepts of friction in International Organisations and the mandate effect, the latter of which is usually applied to democratic systems.

Exposures

By reformatting existing datasets of coded Council Conclusions and Commission Work Programmes to align to the irregular electoral cycle of the College, it is exposed that the assumption that the Council consistently sets the College agenda might be overstated.

Main outcomes

The results point out that the College is increasingly sticky due to a politicised environment affecting friction in responsiveness to signals for policy attention, and that the level of maturity of a College positively affects its openness to change.

Keywords: Punctuated Equilibrium, Comparative Agendas, European Commission, European Council

Foreword

This thesis would not have been possible without the support of some wise, inspiring women. Sisters, mother, grandmother, partner; all have contributed with interest, patience and mental support throughout my education and training. Combining a fulltime job, involvement with the Dutch general elections and finalising the capstone to my MSc. Public Administration has not left me with the time to share my much-obliged appreciation. Further gratitude goes out exclusively to men, my supervisors, Professor Timmermans and dr. Breeman, who have provided guidance and wisdom from a physical distance during the 2020-21 COVID-19 pandemic; and special thanks go out, too, to drs. Nakshbande, because without his pioneering work and collegially provided datasets this query would have remained merely theoretical in nature. I have aspired to leverage his efforts to constructively contribute to the field. Finally, my pious side would like to thank two historical figures, who despite living millennia apart, have captured the essence of the strategic policy entrepreneurship, both preoccupied with centralising political power in Europe. Their statements, whether drafted beautifully by William Shakespeare or diplomatically by a speech writer in the Commission's General Secretariat, should speak for themselves. However, the scientific value of this comparison should not be overstated; this is nothing more than illustrative.

*“There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which, taken control at the flood leads to
fortune;*

*Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries
On such a full sea we are now afloat
And we must take the current when it
serves; Or lose our ventures”*

(Julius Ceasar, IV, Baumgartner & Jones,
2009, p. 237)

*“We have a once-in-a-generation
opportunity to build a stronger, more
united and more democratic union we
collectively deserve.*

*We should grasp this opportunity with
courage and with boldness.*

*This is a time for action, not only for
discussion.”*

(Jean-Claude Juncker, 2018)

Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Abstract | 2 |
| 1. Shaping the Missing Pieces to the EU Puzzle | 7 |
| 2. LITERATURE REVIEW | 12 |
| 2.1. The Punctuated Equilibrium debate | 13 |
| 2.2. Why do institutional cycles matter for PET in the EU? | 20 |
| 3. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK | 23 |
| 3.1. Synthesising the EU PET and mandate theory framework | 23 |
| 4. CASE DESCRIPTION | 26 |
| 4.1. Supra- or international: what kind of body is the College? | 26 |
| 4.2. What role for the College in the EU-policy system? | 27 |
| 5. FORMING THE HYPOTHESIS | 35 |
| 6. RESEARCH DESIGN | 38 |
| 7. OPERATIONALISATION | 49 |
| 8. METHODOLOGY | 53 |
| 9. RESULTS & ANALYSIS | 59 |
| 9.1. What effects can be seen from the new intervals? | 59 |
| 9.3. Is there evidence for institutional cycles in attention distributions? | 62 |
| 9.4. Is the College open to changes from the Council? | 64 |
| 9.5. Do institutional cycles increasingly affect the College's agenda? | 68 |
| 9.7. What other factors can explain increasing and cyclical inertia? | 78 |
| 10. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION | 83 |
| 10.1. Answering the research question | 83 |
| 10.2. Implications: proposing a more comprehensive model | 85 |
| 10.3. Limitations & reservations | 86 |
| 11. CONCLUSION | 88 |

List of figures

| | |
|---|----|
| Figure 1 Composition of the Parliament, 2000-2020..... | 34 |
| Figure 2 Composition of the WPs over time | 60 |
| Figure 3 Composition of the Council Conclusions over time..... | 61 |
| Figure 4 The frequency distribution of percentual change per topic area per WP | 63 |
| Figure 5 Synchronous percentage share of attention for significantly correlated topic areas between the WPs and the preceding Council Conclusions, 2000-2020..... | 66 |
| Figure 6 The pooled frequency distributions of percentual change per topic area for the WP per “maturity”, 2000-2020..... | 71 |
| Figure 7 The frequency distributions of percentual change per topic area for WPs per Commission | 71 |
| Figure 8 Kurtosis and skewness values for the rolling average WP | 75 |
| Figure 9 Interval-on-interval correlation coefficient and the kurtosis level per Commission mandate | 78 |
| Figure 10 Rolling average kurtosis and the level of concentration | 80 |
| Figure 11 Absolute size, relative size and growth for the WPs | 82 |
| Figure 12 Absolute size, relative size and growth for the Council Conclusions | 82 |
| Figure 13 A proposed model for agenda-setting integrating institutional cycles in the College and the EU-policy system at large | 86 |

THE POLITICAL COLLEGE: INCREASED FRICTION OR OPEN TO CHANGE?

List of abbreviations

| | |
|---------|---|
| CAP | Comparative Agendas Project |
| EU | European Unions |
| PET | Punctuated Equilibrium Theory |
| IO | International Organisations |
| QMV | Qualitative Majority Voting |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| TFEU | Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union |
| TEU | Treaty on European Union |
| ECR | European Conservatives and Reformists |
| EDD/ ID | Identity and Democracy |
| EPP | European Peoples Party |
| PES | Party of European Socialists |
| ELDR | European Liberal Democrats and Reformists |
| DG | Directorate General |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organisation |
| HHI | Herfindahl Hirschman Index |
| SW | Shapiro-Wilks test |
| WP | Work Programme |

1. Shaping the Missing Pieces to the EU Puzzle

For some years, the EU has intensified its search for “opportunity to underpin the democratic legitimacy and functioning of the European project as well as to uphold EU citizens' support for [the EU's] common goals and values” (European Council, 2021; cf. Follesdal & Hix, 2006). Therefore, the empirical reality too remains relevant and demands accuracy to answer to the historical significance of current events. From a normative perspective on policy making efficiency, Bang, Jensen and Nedergaard (2015 p. 196) argue that many solutions to the alleged democratic deficit focus on giving more voice to “we the people”, undermining the Commission’s ability to govern because this goes against the functional logic of the EU. Instead, they argue that the EU is, for good reasons, governed by “we the heads of state”, referring to the gravitational centrality of the Council (p. 203). The institutional developments mentioned above are captured through Kassim’s (2020) review of the literature, which reads that the College has undergone “presidentialisation” and “parliamentarisation”. While the former concept is essentially about leadership and governance, the latter concept concerns primarily accountability, which justifies inquisitiveness regarding the reasons for, and implications of, changing attention dynamics in prioritising policy topics in the EU.

The EU policy system is composed of the European Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament¹, three co-legislators often defined as a quasi-federal, quasi-democratic, international organisation. There is no shortage of normative and qualitative empirical work on the democratic functioning of the EU. In light of expected increases in presidential leadership and parliamentary accountability, the empirical results could well be surprising as to the policy making efficiency, expressed in responsiveness to societal demands, of the College of Commissioners (hereinafter the College). Commonly decried as an unelected bureaucracy, “the Commission is in fact a hybrid body”; its services being a permanent administration, and its steering group, the College, “is political” (Kassim, 2020, p. 1). Whereas the Commission is generally viewed as the EU’s executive and formally initiates laws, the Council has been touted as the “*political* executive” of the EU (Fabbrini, 2013, p. 1006; Nakshbande, 2020, p. 2).² To find empirical logic in the Commission’s purported hybridity,

¹ Hereafter referred to respectively as the Council, the Commission and the Parliament to improve readability and save space.

² Nakshbande (2020) is an unpublished Master’s thesis.

recent studies have used policy agenda attention dynamics to uncover that, although modestly, it is the Council that sets the Commission's agenda (Nakshbande, 2020; Elias, 2019). Generally, the Parliament is discounted upfront as agenda-setter by lack of clout (e.g. Eggermont, 2012, pp. 105–110; Baumgartner, Foucault and François, 2012), although *de jure* and through informal institutional developments there is reason to believe this is not a given in the current system (Kassim, 2020; Héritier, 2019). Key to this thesis is this assumption that what happens in the Parliament does not matter and that the Council determines without much delay what is prioritised in the College. To move beyond this assumption, the counterfactual hypothesis tests the causal relationship between annual aggregate attention for policy topics in the Council and the College in the subsequent year (found in Nakshbande, 2020). Regular instances of elections have not yet been included in such tests. In the College, mandates come from delegated electoral processes, implying that elected officials in turn elect the Commissioners, but that does not preclude an accountability link to the electors, whether at the Council or Parliament level, or through mediation at the citizen level. To fill this gap, this thesis proposes a more comprehensive model for analysing attention dynamics in the EU-policy system, and in doing so contributes to the empirical design for analysis, feeding new insights into a lively normative debate.

1.1. Macro-developments in the EU-policy agenda

Those authors who have covered the macro policy developments in the Council and the College in recent years, Nakshbande (2020) and Alexandrova, Rasmussen & Toshkov (2016), have done so building on the US-rooted Comparative Agendas Project (CAP), built on Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET).³ Measuring the policy prioritisation process has been an often contradictory and convoluted endeavour not least because of institutional differentiation through time and space leading to issues with comparability. In that respect, the CAP provides researchers with the basic principles and datasets on which to build their comparative analysis with the needed consistency. Previous empirical work provides a considerable amount of open-source CAP coded policy agendas for the institutions in question (e.g. Nakshbande, 2020; Lundgren, Magnus, Squatrito, Theresa & Tallberg, 2018; Alexandrova et al., 2016;

³ See Baumgartner & Jones (2009, p. 216) for a chapter on “Federalism as a System of Policy venues”

Baumgartner et al., 2012). The CAP is built on the PET framework building on the combined works by Baumgartner and Jones and the seminal work by Downs (1972) on the “ups and downs” of attention to policy topics on agendas, based on a notion of cyclicity in salience where attention increases and decreases gradually. Whereas Downs’ model is incremental, Jones and Baumgartner’s PET hinges more on a notion of friction, due to the cognitive and institutional factors that form hinderance to action. “Institutional friction” occurs when a strong tendency to maintain the status-quo – i.e. irresponsiveness – leads to jumps rather than incremental changes in the policy agenda.

This thesis hypothesises that friction in the EU-policy system is caused by a multiplicity, perhaps increasing number, and ambiguity of accountability links to which the College is subjected, focusing on the 2000-2020 period (see Brooks & Bürgin, 2020; Deckarm, 2017). Directionality of attention shifts becomes more convoluted with the introduction of new and ambiguous accountability links.⁴ Presidentialisation and parliamentarisation of the Commission – respectively pertaining to the way priorities are formed and to the way for which they are accounted – intuitively lead to hypotheses for patterns in friction increase and decrease. Applying the CAP to the EU in 2012, Baumgartner et al. reasoned that “institutional friction within the EU may be substantially lower because of both the delegated process of decision-making and the reduced role of the European Parliament” and “the Commission acts as an executive branch of the EU with its own agenda-setting powers and this may be expected to reduce levels of institutional friction further” (p. 125). However, the authors uncover a high level of institutional friction in which the Commission, Council and Parliament operate (p. 145). Should the Council be the main agenda-setter of the EU-policy system (Nakshbande, 2020), with only minor or even negligible roles for the Parliament, the College and the public, then the reason for friction can be linked to the high levels of friction in the Council (Lundgren et al., 2018; Alexandrova et al., 2014).

1.2. The argument: CAP in the EU is missing institutional cycles

⁴ For example, assume the College attention to topic areas is subject to institutional cycles, as is the Council, then the coinciding or misalignment of these cycles could lead to noise in the causal model proposed for inter-institutional agenda dynamics (i.e. Alexandrova et al., 2016; Nakshbande, 2020). Timeseries modelling commonly takes into account cyclicity to reduce noise.

THE POLITICAL COLLEGE: INCREASED FRICTION OR OPEN TO CHANGE?

The thesis builds on the premise that there is a measurable “mandate effect” and an “incubation time of change” in the College linked to European elections, associated either with the parliamentary or the Council electors of Commissioners, both playing a regularised role in the formation of the College.⁵ This thesis coins a complementary concept of the “maturity” of the mandate. In brief, incubation time of change, which increases due to friction between Commissioners and external sources for friction, decreases over time as the College matures and finds ways to overcome these hurdles. The possible sources and explanations for this friction are ambiguous. The ties to the Member States and governments have become less pronounced, while the affiliations to political parties have played a bigger role (Brooks & Bürgin, 2020; Deckarm, 2017). The measuring of such developments proves challenging because the mandate cycle is both internal and external to the College because the College receives a new mandate, confirmed by the Council and the Parliament every five years, synchronously with the parliamentary elections. And although reforms have been milestones, their effects are expected to be more gradual (Héritier, 2019), so there is no distinct cut-off point between, say, irresponsiveness and responsiveness.

Temporality and regularity are central to this thesis because the external events like focusing events and inherently institutional developments are difficult – if not impossible – to disentangle. Regularity reveals patterns that are less likely attributable to external events and therefore tell a story of the state of affairs within that institution. Whereas the thesis is based on data collections by Alexandrova et al. (2016) and Nakshbande (2020), the operationalisation of the datasets is fundamentally different because the strategy is finetuned to catch up on institutional patterns in the College alone. To build a case, first of all, the thesis consists of a deductive element where the mandate theory is tested on the EU-policy system and an inductive element where concepts from CAP in international organisations (i.e. Lundgren et al., 2018) are integrated in the theoretical framework. The basis is formed with the interinstitutional approach (i.e. Nakshbande, 2020), integrating the electoral cycles in the analysis. Therefore, due to the nature of CAP methodologies, the research design built for this thesis is fundamentally quantitative, large-N, with qualitative elements. Likewise, the CAP inherently provides a basis for the theoretical framework in the form of PET. This concurs with earlier

⁵ The College is elected by the Member States but increasingly the Parliament has gained electoral or controlling powers in that process, for instance through the “hearings” or the *Spitzendkandidaten* reforms (see Kassim, 2020; Héritier, 2019).

work on the mandate effect, that is also based on the PET (e.g. Breeman, Lowery, Poppelaars, Resodihardjo, Timmermans & de Vries, 2009). The design comprises a longitudinal comparative analysis of the College within the EU-policy framework, with an appropriately detailed mapping of its developments. Therefore, the strategy for analysis is based on descriptive statistics with complementary historical contextual analyses.

1.3. Summary and structure

The main question this thesis sets out to answer is:

When and under which conditions is the policy agenda of the College of Commissioners of the EU marked by inertia or by openness to change?

This question will be addressed through the lenses of the PET framework, thus, the first part of the thesis introduces the PET framework through a literature review and presents the theoretical origins of the PET and that of mandate theory to define the thesis' concepts for measurement. This is followed by a review of the PET framework as it has been applied to the EU, giving clout and context. This is used to inform the synthesis of the mandate theory concept of stickiness, also incubation time of change, and the PET concept of institutional friction. These concepts are leading in the case description which connects theoretical, historical and empirical accounts to form a clear frame of the College in light of institutional friction. The second part of the thesis concerns the empirical study of the College. Firstly, the hypotheses are formed, starting off deductively by testing the *null* hypothesis that the Council sets the College's agenda and alternatively that the link is more ambiguous over time. These hypotheses lay the basis for the research design, which elaborates on the operationalisation of the approximations to measure the concepts, including the reformatting of the data to align to the dependent variable focussed analysis. The methodology takes these measurables and provides the quantitative techniques that are commonly used in the CAP, such as analysis of shape statistics in frequency distributions of the change in attention and an issue concentration index. Some of these methods are refined to create a clearer picture. The following is hypothesised:

H0 An increase in the attention paid to a policy domain on the Council agenda is associated with an increase in the attention paid to the same domain on the Commission agenda.

H1 Over time, the parliamentary elections are increasingly followed by a higher-than-average aggregate change in attention on the Commission agenda in the first possible instance of policy prioritisation after an election.

H2 Over time, a higher maturity of the Commission mandate is increasingly associated with a higher-than-average aggregate change in attention on the Commission agenda.

The third part of the thesis reports on the results, provides analysis, and ties all the findings together in the new proposed framework for interinstitutional agenda-setting analysis in the EU. Nakshbande's (2020) conclusion, this thesis' *null* hypothesis, is reconfirmed with stronger results, thus reaffirming the baseline that the previous Council attention distribution is consistently associated with the attention distributions in the College of some topic areas. *H1* that elections are directly followed by higher-than-average change is rejected and *H2* that supposing that the longer the College is in its mandate, the higher the change is, is cautiously confirmed. Finally, the discussion and conclusion continue with a special focus on the Juncker Commission, arguing for a more comprehensive model for analysing the College, the Council and the interinstitutional dynamics between them, or the EU-policy system as a whole. The results in this thesis show that the College is an increasingly sticky executive, meaning that incumbency increases openness to change after an incubation time. The research design of this thesis cannot conclude definitively whether this openness to change is due to frictional pressures from internal sources, such as preference heterogeneity, or external sources, such as the Council, the Parliament or the public. Although the methods used indicate that in the setting of prospective policy priorities the role of the Council could well be overstated in the current literature, and the role of the Parliament understated. Finally, the periodically regular cycles of inertia found, complicates the inferential model for interinstitutional agenda-setting and provide additional caveats to research focussed on agenda dynamics of individual issues, too.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Kassim's (2020) presidentialisation and parliamentarisation (p. 7) are the starting point for the premises in this thesis. As such, they will be the central explanatory concepts to capture processes in the College. Underneath lies the theoretical core for the thesis, formed by the measurable PET concepts of friction – inertia and openness to change (Baumgartner & Jones, 2015; Lundgren et al., 2018). PET provides for both international elements pertaining to friction from international cooperation and from democratic systems where electoral cycles play an important role. On the one hand, institutional friction is the core concept for the explanatory concept of presidentialisation and the measurable concept of inertia, and on the other, the accountability link is the core concept for the explanatory concept of parliamentarisation and the measurable concept of openness to change. Building up to those links, this literature review starts from the origins of the PET debate and home in close towards the concepts that inform the theoretical framework. The two complementary explanations of policy attention dynamics are compared in a review of “incrementalism” and “punctuation”, including a review of the conditions that have been ascribed to influence the process of prioritisation of policy issues on the political agenda. Finally, this chapter reviews how the PET framework has been applied in empirical studies of the EU-policy system.

2.1. The Punctuated Equilibrium debate

In a review of the historical origins of contemporary policy dynamics studies, Howlett and Cashore (2009) find that broad debt is owed to Charles Lindblom's (1959) work on incrementalism and Peter Hall's (1990) conceptualisation of policy paradigms. In turn these authors have gleaned of their insights from Herbert Simon's (1957) theorisations on organisational behaviour and Thomas Kuhn's (1962) ideation of scientific advance, respectively. Howlett (1997) outlines early references to the question whether systematic and regular [predictable] patterns of policymaking exist. Brewer (1974) laid out that the policy process has six stages: invention/initiation; estimation; selection; implementation; evaluation; and termination. Rose (1974) identified that decision makers are influenced by endogenous (e.g. in house scientific advice and organisational doctrine) and exogenous (public attention and opinion) factors. The question Rose posed in 1974 is a simple one: when and to what extent do governments change their policies? A significant part of process of policy formation is the

politics of attention (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). There are two generations of complementary paradigms to be identified in policy dynamics studies. Grounded in rational theory, policy dynamics stems from incrementalism, where at a later stage PET, informed by bounded rationality, has been grafted on top, complementing rather than competing with the existing assumptions. Baumgartner and Jones postulate a useful normative distinction. Either under- or overresponse are inefficient because this causes misalignment to the “optimal” distribution of resources to address the set of policy issues existing in society.

2.1.1. What causes openness to change and inertia?

PET (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991; 2002; 2009) and policy attention cycles (Downs, 1972) have both been popular conceptualisations for explaining how and to what extent public attention dynamics and institutional factors influence the policy agenda and policy change. The reason for, and implications of, variations in openness to change and inertia are captured in the conceptual framework that originated from this debate. Critically, there is overlap between the two concepts but – as the keywords “cycle” and “punctuation” suggest – the occurrence of change can be observed as taking shape in different patterns. Whereas Downs presupposes a systematic and regular development of issue distribution in society and in politics, Baumgartner and Jones argue that such developments are generally characterised by punctuated equilibrium due to “friction”, which limits responsiveness. From the 1950s to the 1990s, the incrementalist model dominated policymaking theory, including the “Downsian” model. In the end, Howlett & Migone (2011) argue that the punctuated equilibrium model is above all a much-improved version of the incrementalist theory.

Princen (2013) argues that the strand of research that builds on the later work of Baumgartner and Jones (e.g. 2005), where the focus is more on overall (“macro”) distributions of attention, has informed an important body of literature and research on the patterns of attention distribution and change. The author explains that friction occurs because institutional frameworks impose certain “hurdles” for policy change (p. 858). Adding that to the extent to which policymaking institutions impose a level of friction, policy change can be expected to be less frequent, but the “corrections” will be greater. The degree of friction in a system matters because “friction causes the linkage between inputs and outputs of the system to be disproportionate – under response because of friction, then overresponse in response to built-up pressures” (Baumgartner et al. 2009, p. 607). Therefore, a decision-making process subject to lower conditions of friction is associated with a higher degree of incremental change, expressed in more medium sized changes in attention, and conversely the process subject to

higher conditions of friction is associated with a higher degree of punctuated change, expressed as fewer medium sized changes in attention and more changes at the extremities, i.e. (near-)zero or high.

Furthermore, Baumgartner and Jones, with their collaborators, have continuously contributed to the exploration of the causal relationship between qualities of information and the nature of information processing by organisations and individuals, and the patterns of policy making that can be found in democracies. To this end, True et al. (2007) argue that analysis of complete datasets of policymaking processes that are produced by legislatures can provide insight into the qualities of the institutions. Subsequently, they claim that researchers can find evidence of “punctuated change distributions.” These are characterised by (1) relatively many cases of no or little change, and (2) relatively many cases of radical policy change (p. 168) – and therefore relatively few moderate changes.

2.1.2. Incremental cycles

Prindle (2012) describes in a history of policy process theories how Lindblom influentially countered the then dominant “rational-comprehensive method”, instead arguing that, “policymakers use successive limited comparisons in order to make evaluative and deliberative decision-making processes humanly possible.” Attention for information is scarce – information is always in oversupply in decision making situations. The distribution of scarce goods is characterised by efficiency optimising behaviour, but not by rational behaviour per se. Therefore, democracies change their policies through incremental processes with smaller adjustments, “policy does not move in leaps and bounds” (Lindblom, 1959 p. 208). Indeed, this presupposition informed much of the subsequent research – the boundedly rational decision-making process is still not very controversial (Prindle, 2012; cf. Baumgartner and Jones, 2009, p. 104). For example, Davis, Dempster & Wildavsky (1974) instrumentalised this idea by analysing budgetary data for a protracted period and found weak evidence for the incrementalist premise that attention develops gradually (cf. Baumgartner et al., 2012, p. 127).

In this vein, Howlett (1997 p. 5) theorises that government has only little effect on the policy agenda, instead posing that the pre-political, or at least pre-decisional processes often play the most critical role. This would mean that decision-making bodies do little more than recognise, document and legalise the momentary results of the “continuing struggle of forces in the larger social matrix”. Therefore, from this perspective, critical to the relationship between the public and policy became the question: how does an issue or a demand become or fail to become the focus of concern and interest within a polity? (cf. Ross, 1973).

Downs theorised how two more general conceptual challenges to policy process research could be coherently put together under one conceptual roof. Firstly, the possibility, if not probability, of feedback loops in attention interferes with the basic premise that policy dynamics are driven by initiation and invention alone. Downs argued that the different stages of policy process, from initiation to evaluation, are rarely, if ever, delineated with a clear start-and-stop in time and space. Cyclicity in policy attention was captured first by Downs (1972) in his seminal article “Up and Down with Ecology: The issue Attention Cycle”. Downs presupposed that cycles in issue attention could be attributed to the inherent attention spans of the public. Regardless the nature and source of the increased attention, the public would eventually grow bored of certain issues and subsequently be disinterested. Downs described this as (1) the pre-problem stage, (2) alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm, (3) a period marked by a growing realisation of the cost of significant progress, (4) gradual decline of public interest, and (5) the post-problem stage. Thus, attention is reflected by the allocation of time and energy that an individual spends thinking about an issue (Newig, 2004 p. 153).

Although this premise was mostly anecdotal and somewhat vague (Howlett, 1997 p. 9), and much empirical research now indicates this to be overly stylistic, the theory implied an informative and useful conceptualisation of complex relationship between media attention, public attention and government action (Gupta & Jenkins-Smith, 2015 p. 319). Whereas the public weighs (dis)advantage and allocates resources accordingly, politicians, in any case the ones who decide the agenda, weigh electoral (dis)advantages.

2.1.3. PET in IOs and democracies

Baumgartner and Jones premise that complex subsystems, where members and non-members struggle to construct, destruct, and alter images of issues, drive the attention distribution on the agenda (Baumgartner & Jones, 2002; cf. Howlett, 1997 p. 9). How does this result in punctuated equilibrium? Baumgartner and Jones (2009) argue that policymakers are subject to processes that result in a “bottleneck of attention” (p. 104), with the subsequent “attention lurches” (p. 169). Individuals, experts, groups, government officials and politicians, and media interact with each other to shape the agenda to their perceived interest. In this sense, regularity in predictability as described by Downs is not a likely reflection of the real state of the world. Much empirical research has since pointed to the existence and significance of these complex subsystems for the dynamics of policy agendas over time. The critical element influencing agenda-setting, Baumgartner and Jones argue, is connected to the creation of “policy monopolies”. This way, subsystems can gain the ability to control the interpretation of a

problem (Howlett, 1997 p. 10). To capture the PET succinctly: patterns of punctuation, where stability alternates with radical change, are a key characteristic of policy agenda dynamics. Policymakers' cognitive limitations and institutional hurdles to decision-making cause policy agendas to lean toward relative stability. Stability is occasionally broken when attention shifts from one issue to another, for instance, because a large-scale event occurs, or new information is available. This thesis focusses on the College, which is neither a regular IO nor a "normal political executive" (Wille, 2013), but rather a hybrid (Kassim, p. 1) That is why two strands of PET literature, and concepts, are combined in this review. On the one hand, this includes concepts from a PET approach for IOs, while on the other hand this is supplemented with concepts from PET focussing on the mandate effect.

2.1.4. Institutional friction in IOs

Lundgren et al. (2018) pioneered a broader research agenda for the use of PET for understanding the macro policy dynamics of IOs. Focusing on the overall macro-pattern of policymaking in IOs, rather than the causes of individual punctuations, PET leads to an expectation of long periods of stability in policy agendas punctuated by rapid change.⁶ Lundgren et al., (2018 p. 553) suggest that three factors comprise institutional friction for international policymaking. They base their delineation of the three factors of "decision rules", "membership size" and "preference heterogeneity" on rational institutionalist scholarship. Adding that "[w]hile institutional friction conceptually includes cognitive limitations and institutional barriers (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005), actual tests have focused on the latter" (Lundgren et al., (2018 p. 561). They adapt the institutional friction index as operationalised by (Jones et al., 2009) including these concepts.

In abstract terms, "institutional" friction can be understood as the costs involved in the translation of policy inputs into policy outputs (Jones et al. 2003). The costs incurred are either caused by an opposing force or by static institutional hurdles. These can be divisions of power and procedural thresholds for policy adoption. In the literature on PET a plethora of concepts exists that aim to capture the different mechanisms that affect the path for societal signals, such

⁶ Punctuated equilibrium had been postulated by biologists Eldredge and Gould in (1972) as an alternative interpretation to the classical Darwinist conception of constant, incremental evolutionary change. In Prindle's (2012) words, "the evidence of the rocks showed a history of life "characterised by rapid evolutionary events punctuating a history of stasis". Importantly, the concept does not explain a causal relationship, but rather an alternate characterisation of the pace and structure of the development.

as elections, research, media, to translate into an aggregate of policy priorities on the political agenda. Generally, the more open a structure, the greater the scope and the higher the political accountability the decision-making process has, the greater its potential for hindrance and opposition – for hurdles. Critically, if presidentialisation leads to lower friction, the result could still be inertia with punctuated equilibrium. In the natural sciences friction is understood as resistance, not a fundamental force. Therefore, the result of a decrease in friction is dependent on the fundamental drivers for either change or inertia.⁷

IOs are particular in the way institutional friction affects the processes. Firstly, because IOs vary in their institutional rules on decision-making (Blake & Payton, 2015), decision rules can contribute to friction, affecting the ability to arrive at policy decisions (Scharpf, 1988; Tsebelis & Yatahanas 2002). An example from the EU would be that the increase in Qualitative Majority Voting (QMV) in the Council has led to greater decision-making efficiency. Secondly, membership size can be expected to be a source of institutional friction. As Keohane pointed out for international cooperation, the number of actors, now widely accepted, shapes the likelihood and nature of cooperation (Axelrod & Keohane, 1985; Koremenos, Lipson & Snidal, 2001). For IOs, the number of Member States – or perhaps also the role of the representatives – in the decision-making body matters.⁸ All else equal, the higher the number of represented parties, the higher the expected transaction costs of coming to a decision. Finally, the authors stipulate that preference heterogeneity among Member States contributes to institutional friction; the distribution of state preferences affects institutional design, institutional change, and delegation in international politics (Axelrod & Keohane, 1985; Hawkins et al., 2006; Koremenos et al., 2001).

Moreover, Lundgren et al. (2018) note that IOs are subject to inter- and transnational influence and transnational actors, such as NGOs, leveraging IOs for international action (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). They serve multiple principals. On the one hand, they serve member governments representing domestic constituencies (Moravcsik, 1997), while on the other hand, they serve supranational bureaucracies with interests in international policy response (Johnson,

⁷ The study of macro-level developments that hold explanatory value for the institutional developments between IOs and over time have only just scratched the surface. Only in recent years, a significant number of IOs have gained more decision-making powers over an increasing range of domains (Hooghe, Marks, Lenz, Bezuijen, Ceka & Derderyan, 2017).

⁸ This differentiation is made because Member States are neither always represented on a 1:1 ratio, nor relative to their contributions, or the population size. In the College, a 1:1 ratio applies, which prompts the scope to move more towards informal differences in power relations.

2014; Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). Still, the significance of this peculiarity might be reduced because oftentimes the problems that concern national and international policymaking are the same (cf. Baumgartner, Green-Pedersen & Jones, 2006 pp. 605–606). Yet not uncommonly, conflicts between the Parliament and the Council have manifested, and policy agendas are certainly not always harmonised. This ambiguity evokes an expectation that IOs then could be more susceptible to strategic venue shopping (cf. Alter & Meunier, 2009). The College is proof of point for this argument because while its competencies have increased, the delineation between the Council, the Commission and the Parliament has become more ambiguous.

2.1.5. Stickiness of the system vs. maturity of the government

In the College, mandates come from delegated electoral processes, implying that elected officials in turn elect the Commissioners, but that does not preclude an accountability link to the electors, whether at the Council or Parliament level, or through mediation at the citizen level. “[M]embers of the College, including the [P]resident, are appointed by the governments of the Member States and elected by the European Parliament every five years, following popular elections to the latter body” (Kassim, 2020, p.1). In the case description, this specific electoral system will be elaborated on in more detail. Linking parliamentarisation with openness to change, “mandate theory” posits that parties may be expected to be responsive to their voters and fulfil electoral promises when in office (Hofferbert & Budge, 1992; cf. Breeman et al., 2009, p. 2).

The “stickiness” refers to the expected incubation period for decision makers that are new in office to shift attention on the policy agenda. Governments do not simply reflect the distribution of salience or attention onto a mirror image executive policy agenda. Some issues are absorbed while others are not (Blondel & Thiebault, 1988) which is linked to the level of institutional friction. In systems with little friction, openness to change occurs in periods shortly after elections in political systems that where the benefits of changing the agenda are larger than the costs for the officials taking office. According to Laver and Budge (1992), the benefits of changing the status-quo are reduced in systems that tend to have an incremental course of attention change in the policy agenda.

With “maturity”, this thesis coins a new sub-concept to capture the ability of governments to overcome the stickiness of the system, which is analogous to the level of friction, whether due to international or political institutional conditions. It is an attempt to define an explanatory concept for Polsby’s (1984) incubation time of change. In a democratic system, institutional specificities are key for understanding how, why and to what extent the

policy agenda is conditioned by the electoral cycle. This is instrumental to the argument of this thesis because in the College, the policy priorities from four years – or publications of policy agendas – ago could finally make their way to the WP in the final publication, speaking truths to the title of Juncker’s final programme: “Delivering what we promised and preparing for the future” (2018). The concepts established conceptual framework of the mandate theory has previously been successfully operationalised withing the PET to national executives. For example, in a longitudinal analysis of policy attention dynamics in the Dutch system of government, Breeman et al. (2009) aim to unearth whether occurrences of attention shifts have been more episodic (i.e. punctuated), or incremental. Their focus is on the influence of the electoral cycle and the “mandate effect”. They find that governments prolonging their stay in office are generally more inclined to shift issue-attention than new governments. The Dutch system is characterised by a coalition system, where electoral results virtually never make for a total turnover of coalition parties. This system can be seen as “sticky”, whereas a two-party system with a powerful executive like the US can be expected to be “less sticky”.

2.2. Why do institutional cycles matter for PET in the EU?

There is a niche for focus on the College and the institutional cycles associated with it. Whereas there is a rich body of theoretical and empirical work on the EU policy system in general, there is relatively little focus on, on the one hand, the College and its strategic behaviour, and on the other hand, on the attention dynamics rather than the policy produced.⁹ Fortunately, techniques based on Jones and Baumgartner’s methods exist for assessing the level of institutional friction, and thus the stickiness, through a constant source of approximations; for instance Lundgren et al. (2018, p. 561) cite Baumgartner et al. (2009) and Jones et al. (2009), who demonstrated “a correlation between institutional friction and leptokurtic distributions in outputs.”¹⁰ These authors operationalise this method, attempting to set the PET research agenda for IOs, performing an exploratory broad comparative analysis of several IOs, including the EU. In their research design. Critically, the existing work has, apart from Nakshbande (2020), consistently focussed on the Council or the EU – as a whole – as the dependent variable.

⁹ See Kreppel & Oztas (2017) for a strategy that compares prospective priorities and output.

¹⁰ Leptokurtosis occurs when a frequency distribution being more concentrated about the mean than the corresponding normal distribution (Prindle, 2012).

Overwhelmingly, the Council Conclusions have been used as approximations, among others by Alexandrova, Carammia, Princen and Timmermans (2014, pp. 156–157), Alexandrova (2017), Alexandrova et al. (2016), Alexandrova (2015b), Alexandrova and Timmermans (2013), and by Nakshbande (2020).

The College is a changing institution in a changing system, not uncommonly subject to explicit operational reforms. Firstly, the “Commission” is actually a set of Directorates Generals (DG), headed by the College of Commissioners, who rely on their Cabinets. Kassim (2020, p.1) typifies this as an international administration. There is enough variation in institutional characteristics between the different DGs, and the Cabinets for that matter (p. 14), alone to justify a comparative analysis covering exclusively this area. The DGs formally provide the EU institutions with technical input, although the debate is still ongoing on the extent to which party politics has infiltrated these bureaucracies (e.g. Deckarm, 2017; Brooks & Bürgin, 2020). Secondly, the College has seen significant developments as a decision-making body in the 1999-2019 period. Treaty reforms and internal governance reforms have potentially significantly reshaped the College and its place in EU policymaking and politics. This has led to presumptions of greater “presidential accountability”, “parliamentary control” (Wille, 2013) and “political steering” (Brooks & Bürgin, 2020; cf. Kassim, 2020).

2.2.1. Electoral cycles are insufficiently incorporated

Future attempts might at the very least *take into account* the elections for the Parliament and the College. Eggermont (2012, pp. 105–110) points out that both the Council and the Parliament have the prerogative to intervene with all issues of Union policy, while the Commission maintains, formally, the right of initiative for legislative proposals. Still, before resources are allocated by the Commission to certain “issues” to form a proposal, there are potentially multiple sources of information competing for the policymakers’ scarce attention. Additionally, the relations between the Commission and the Council when forming their policy agendas is, due to convolutedness and obscurity, disputed (Nakshbande, 2020, pp. 30-31; cf. Nugent & Rhinard, 2016, pp. 1201–1203; Werts, 2008, pp. 64–65; Höing & Wessels, 2013, p. 139; Kreppel & Oztas, 2016; Baumgartner et al., 2012, p. 126). Eggermont’s (2012) description that the Council has the political initiative and the Commission the technical political initiative (p. 109) is mostly stylistic. A more likely reality is one where strategic or boundedly rational actors in both decision-making bodies have ample reason to take-note of, react to, or even act strategically with the political environment in which they find themselves, or from which they experience some form of dependence. Baumgartner et al. (2012) reasoned that “institutional

friction within the EU may be substantially lower because of both the delegated process of decision-making and the reduced role of the European Parliament” and “the Commission acts as an executive branch of EU with its own agenda-setting powers and this may be expected to reduce levels of institutional friction further” (p. 125). However, they uncover a high level of institutional friction in which the Commission, Council and Parliament operate (p. 145). Nakshbande (2020) finds that the agenda-setting capacity of the Commission is limited, and thus potentially solves part of this puzzle. But this is only one piece of the puzzle, where the still missing pieces can be identified as the “delegated process”, understood as distance between principal and agent, and the “reduced role of the Parliament”. Not to mention that these assumptions subject to change over time.

2.2.2. Systematic error looms due to cyclicity and irregularity

Common to the CAP is an approach that uses the calendar year and nominal publications as the benchmark for delineating intervals for measuring observations, while often publications of agendas are irregular. The timeseries used in Nakshbande’s (2020) analyses of the Council and the College have been based on calendar years, while the political calendar is dyssynchronous and irregular, and therefore such an approach is non-robust to institutional cycles. Nakshbande (2020) finds that the Commission WPs give support to the premise that the Commission is more sensitive to public salience and is in converge with the policy agenda of the Council, measured through a yearly aggregate of the Council Conclusions. The author considers the economic developments, employment levels, public salience, and historical developments. However, the electoral cycles are not incorporated in the inferential model, despite having the Commission policy agenda in place as the dependent variable. As a result, the commendable effort for inferring the source of changes, and punctuations, in the Commission’s policy agenda appears to have assumed the insignificance of the Parliamentary elections. This evokes the necessity for further enquiry because there might be hidden effects from increased “presidential accountability”, “parliamentary control” and “political steering”. Therefore, whereas the thesis is based on data collections by Alexandrova et al. (2016) and Nakshbande (2020), the operationalisation of the datasets is fundamentally different. The strategy is dependent variable-focussed, which in this case means that the Commission policy agenda and its temporality is central. Thus, the publications of the WPs, which are taken as an approximation for the attention in the College, serve as the gauge of reference when comparing to the other variables.

3. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter synthesises the PET framework for the EU as it has been developed at its most recent in the research agenda by Lundgren et al. (2018) with the concepts of the mandate effect theory (borrowing from Breeman et al., 2009) that co-inhabit the PET framework. To study the College more accurately within the PET framework, this thesis attempts a tailoring, synthesising concepts from Lundgren et al.'s IO research agenda with concepts that have been applied to executives that are subject to electoral cycles.

3.1. Synthesising the EU PET and mandate theory framework

From the theory discussed, an abstraction can be made that juxtaposes the internal and the external elements in the power balance that conditions the level of punctuation in the College's policy agenda.¹¹ On the one hand, the external forces are giving off signals to the College to give more, or less, attention to certain issues. These can be, for instance, new information or politically strategic signals.¹² On the other hand, internal to the College, the institutional obstructions, such as the number of members, heterogenous preferences, and demanding decision rules, delay or even stop the reactive process. The effects of friction on responsiveness of the College is measured through 1.) the College decision rules, 2.) the membership size, 3.) the level of preference heterogeneity of College members, 4.) the instances of parliamentary and College elections and 5.) the political composition of the Parliament. The rationale and definitions are elaborated on in the following. In order to construct a clear framework that alludes to presidentialisation in the College and parliamentarisation *of* the College. An internal-external distinction is made comprising, on the one hand, the internal changes in the College over time, and on the other hand, the external developments over time. In Table 1 below, the sources for friction and release in the College are categorised according to this operational

¹¹ There is also a more practical reason for opting for a College focus. The CAP approach requires an empirical and comparable set of observations of policy attention (or content). While this is probably theoretically feasible for the Commission DGs, Cabinets *and* the College, the focus on the highest-level decision-making body in the Commission provides the best alternative for making inferences regarding the effects of institutional reforms aimed at democratising the College.

¹² New information from in house technical bodies is, according to the theory, not a likely source for punctuated shifts in policy attention. Research units rarely, if ever, publish earth shattering findings that then end up on the policy agenda without intermediation through other venues.

dichotomy. It must be noted that for both internal as well as external sources for the level of friction, these are merely a selection linked to expected significance based on the literature. Theoretically, the sources of friction are limitless.

Table 1.

Synthesising the factors affecting institutional friction in the College

| Sources for friction and release in the College | |
|---|---------------------------|
| <i>Internal source:</i> | <i>External source:</i> |
| Membership size (states) | The Council policy agenda |
| (Political) preference heterogeneity | Instances of elections |
| Decision rules | Parliamentary composition |

Still, the conceptual framework for friction must be further tailored. The concept of international preference heterogeneity does not translate neatly to the political nature of the College because in the College political preferences are more explicitly, and potentially increasingly, expressed through political affiliations. But it remains quite certain that nationally specific factors play an important role in the political views of the Commissioners. Consequently, explicit political preference heterogeneity is taken as the indicator in this tailored theoretical framework. This can be done without omitting completely sensitivity for the preferences from national-specific contexts because these are also reflected in the measurement for membership size. Finally, Lundgren et al.'s (2018) operationalisation of the IO institutional friction concept applied to the College would not serve the purpose of this synthesis which is primarily to uncover the extent to which the College is responsive to Parliamentary election outcomes. The authors provide a relatively sophisticated index for quantifying and comparing the different levels of institutional friction in IOs over time and across IOs.

3.1.1. Caveats to the synthesis

In their attempt to extend the PET framework to IOs, Lundgren et al. (2018) identify some caveats. Firstly, compared to (sub-)national policymaking, international policymaking is usually more decentralised and less hierarchical. Decisions are generally taken by a collective principal composed of member governments with their internal processes of preference formation and decision-making (Hawkins, Lake, Nielson & Tierney, 2006). Clearly, the EU context deserves more specific differentiation due to its quasi-supranational, developing

parliamentary system. Secondly, IOs are generally less exposed to public pressure as international issues normally are less politically salient and international decision-makers are not accountable to electorates in the same way (Held & Koenig-Archibugi, 2005). This reservation is indeed valid for the EU context too, to a certain extent. However, the level of salience, and thus possible responsiveness, is neither homogenous nor static across policy issues in the EU. Therefore, sensitivity and responsiveness are likely differentiated, in line with Nakshbande's (2020, pp. 62-65) findings. Lastly, IOs are less subject to clear divisions of responsibility. Because of their more fluid and overlapping mandates (Alter & Meunier, 2009), this could lead to challenges in the delineation of policy attention. To this end, measuring the WPs as approximations for attention is the best alternative due to their proximity to the intentions of the College – as opposed to accomplishments.

Additionally, the Commission is such a convoluted organisation in terms of governance and prioritisation processes, this could be susceptible to overly simplistic assumptions as to the source of information that “causes” attention shifts. To be more specific, the sources for information for Commissioners can come from either typically more incremental sources of information like 1.) in-house technical bodies¹³ and 2.) public salience¹⁴ in Downsian terms, or from typically more strategic sources of information or signals 3.) other institutional stakeholders¹⁵ and 4.) non-governmental organisation sources¹⁶. Information in this sense refers to any type of information that can affect the level of attention policymakers give to a certain issue. Finally, these disputable interpretations are in themselves differentiated between topic areas in general and in the Commission specifically due to overlapping mandates and dynamic mandates, i.e. venue shopping.

¹³ e.g. the DGs in the Commission or ministries.

¹⁴ e.g. the Eurobarometer survey reports or personal experiences.

¹⁵ e.g. other levels of government or affiliate political factions.

¹⁶ e.g. NGOs, interest groups, think-tanks.

4. CASE DESCRIPTION

The purpose of this chapter is to contextualise the theoretical expectations with the secondary literature that covers the concepts that have been selected for the operationalisation in chapter 6. To reiterate, the Commission as the subject of this thesis has been central to much of the normative debate around processes of policy prioritisation in the EU. Kassim's (2020) review of the literature reads that the College of Commissioners has undergone presidentialisation and parliamentarisation. While the former concept is essentially about leadership, the latter concept concerns primarily accountability. Both affect the process of setting the EU's political agenda which "is a critical and usually powerful aspect of policymaking" (Kreppel & Oztas, p. 1118). One interpretation in line with the PET is that increased accountability to a parliament¹⁷ leads to increased sensitivity to political signals from that parliament, while the level of friction forms a hinderance to responsiveness. In this sense the College would have gotten more sensitive to the Parliament and less hindered by diffuse competencies within, i.e. presidentialised.¹⁸

4.1. Supra- or international: what kind of body is the College?

This thesis explores an extension of the empirical framework, which should ultimately feed into the discussion on the normative implications of the role and function of the Commission. Could democratic legitimacy and efficiency in allotting policy attention be negatively related? In the literature, the Commission has been difficult to pin down as either an intergovernmental IO¹⁹, a political executive or as a "Weberian" bureaucracy. Kassim (2020, p. 1) reiterates that "there is considerable disagreement on how the Commission's role in integration should be theorised and how the Commission as a body should be conceptualised." According to Chang and Monar (2013), "The European Commission has alternatively been portrayed as an all-powerful institution controlling far too many resources versus a bureaucracy that operates at the behest of Member States." The Commission features in many, though not all, discussions

¹⁷ Either in operational procedures (day-to-day) or in electoral processes

¹⁸ Public Administration at the intersect with International Relations echoes the intergovernmentalism versus supranationalism debate that characterises the history of European integration at large and the EU-policy system more specifically.

¹⁹ See for a definition of IOs: Britannica (2021). See for a recent and detailed discussion on the organisational type of the Commission, and of its College, Kassim (2020)

of the EU's alleged "democratic deficit." The most prominent questions concern the Commission's remoteness and purported lack of democratic accountability, though some criticisms are based on an exaggerated view of its power and influence, misunderstandings of its role within the wider system (Kassim, 2020, p. 32). Over time, as responsibilities for the Commission and the Parliament increased, the demand for democratic accountability has invalidated the principles of sole technocratic output legitimacy (Follesdal & Hix, 2006).

4.2. What role for the College in the EU-policy system?

For a longitudinal cross-section of the College and its environment, the core tenets of the theoretical framework as described in the previous chapter will be outlined using both primary and secondary sources. Firstly, the *de jure* role of the Commission and its college are elaborated on, and subsequently the developments in the College are circumstantiated. It should be noted here that the day-to-day interactions between the College, the Council and the Parliament are of lesser interest to this case because attention for issues – in any case the broad strokes – on the annual policy agenda are assumed not be affected significantly by the operations in the execution of the policy priorities. Therefore, this case description focusses on the institutional developments that are likely to have a significant influence on the formation process of the policy agenda of the College.

4.2.1. The *de Jure* role of the Commission

The agenda setting competence has historically been shared between the Council and the Commission, the Treaty on European Union (TEU) stipulates that the Council must "provide the Union with the necessary impetus for its development" and "define the general political directions and priorities thereof" (Art. 9b TEU). Similarly, the European Commission "shall promote the general interest of the union and take appropriate initiatives to this end" (Art. 9d TEU). At the same time, the Treaties stipulate that the European Commission "shall neither seek nor take instructions from any government or other institution" (Art 9d. TEU). Nakshbande (2020, p. 3) concludes that to this end, the presumed or intended role of the Council would be to set the "political" agenda, and for the Commission to set the "technical" agenda (cf. Eggermont 2012, p. 109). Additionally, in accordance with TFEU (Art. 291), the "Commission exercises the powers conferred on it for the implementation of the legislative acts laid down by Parliament and the Council." Hence, formally the Parliament too lays out, to

some degree, the political priorities for the Commission. Then, when in 2009 the Treaty of Lisbon introduced Art. 291(3) TFEU and Regulation (EU) No 182/2011 the right of scrutiny accorded to Parliament and the Council is formally included, as is a provision for an appeal procedure in cases of conflict. Thus, the College can be expected to have become formally more dependent on the Council as well as the Parliament in its implementing (i.e. decision-making) freedom. The Treaty of Lisbon is in that sense a milestone in the inter-institutional power relations in the EU, but surrounding the Treaty are possibly additional and less obvious reasons causing these relations, and thus the expected level and nature of friction, to change.

As the EU policy system has undergone reforms over its lifetime, competing categorisations for the “executive” have made their way into the debate of European integration. For instance, the idea of a “fused administration” (Wessels, 1997), which focusses on the close interaction between the Commission and the Member State bureaucracies, which was later challenged by Trondal (2010) with the notion of an emergent European executive order” – a parallel administration of EU-level agencies and EU committees. More broadly in the literature, over the decades, the Commission’s silhouette becomes ever more clearly recognisable as a political executive with – formally – discretion over its own actions.

4.2.2. To whom is the College accountable?

Christiansen (1997) observed that the Commission is “multiply accountable,” “from its appointment by the Council and approval by the European Parliament, to the possibility of its removal by a censure vote in the Parliament, oversight of its implementing activities through comitology, and scrutiny of its financial management by the European Court of Auditors and the Parliament” (Kassim, 2020, p. 32). Furthermore, Kassim (2020, pp. 5-16) identifies three major reforms within the Commission that should be noted to create a more granular outline of the developments that have shaped the real implications of the Commission’s prerogative to initiate policies, and indeed decide which issues receive attention. Far from being an exhaustive account of the possible causes of institutional friction in the Commission over its lifetime, the following covers the most significant developments.

Firstly, the College is accountable to the Council. Established as an informal summit meeting in 1975, the Council became a formal EU institution, with a full-time President, in 2009, on the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon. It consists of the Heads of State or Government of the 27 EU Member States, the President of the Council and the President of the Commission (Article 15(2) TEU), its decisions are taken mainly by consensus, but in certain cases, the Council can also decide by qualified majority (Anghel, Bacian, Drachenberg &

Papunen, 2020, p. 1). At the beginning of the 2014-2019 and the 2019-2024 institutional cycles, the European Council also adopted an agenda of strategic priorities, designed to guide the work of the EU over the five-year period (ibid.). On top of that, the Council must also to “consider each year the employment situation in the Union and adopt conclusions thereon, on the basis of a joint annual report by the Council and the Commission” (Article 148 TFEU). At the same time, the European Council frequently invites or calls on the Commission to initiate specific legislation or to speed up ongoing legislative procedures. Moreover, the President of the Parliament is “invited to speak” as the first item on the Council's agenda, followed by an exchange of views (Article 235(2) TFEU) (Höing & Wessels, 2013).

Furthermore, Article 241 TFEU grants the Council of Ministers, Parliament, and Council the prerogative to “intervene in all issues of Union policy” and to “influence the contents of Commission proposals” (Eggermont, 2012, pp. 105–110). Nakshbande (2020) identifies the Council Conclusions as primary vessel for the Council to shape the Commission’s policy agenda. These Conclusions “summarise which decisions and political priorities the HSGs have determined at the summit” (p. 25). Adding that, Höing and Wessels (2013) report that the European Council makes frequent use of this prerogative by using its Conclusions to call upon the Commission to initiate legislation (Höing & Wessels, 2013, p. 134). Finally, the author cites Werts (2008) that the Council tends to increasingly “delve into the nitty gritty” details and issue increasingly specific demands and calls for action which would “undermine the independent position of the Commission” (pp. 46–47).

However, Nakshbande (2020, p. 27) points out that “the Commission is not merely a passive recipient of the Council agenda, but actively participates in shaping that agenda, too. The Commission also tends to be closely involved in preparations for Council summits”, and “the Commission President is not only subservient to, but also strategically exploits the Council. Indeed, the Commission President makes strategic use of its seat at the table of the Council summits as an effective vehicle to present [the Commission’s] own priorities” (cf. Werts, 2008, p. 53). At the same time, there is reason to believe that College members are increasingly likely to perceive the explicit mandate, when accountable through hearings, and implicit mandate, due to dependence for policy progress on continued acquiescence, from the Parliament as necessary for their political success.

Secondly, the College is accountable to the Parliament. The European elections have been held since 1979. From an integration angle, “a directly elected European Parliament would be a catalyst that would activate the European people and set the whole system of Community [later the EU] institutions in motion” (March & Mikhaylov, 2010, p. 1). Indeed,

“[t]he decision to establish direct elections to the European Parliament was intended by EU-integration proponents to establish a direct link between the individual citizen and decision making at the European level” (ibid.). These elections are held every 5 years, where voters from all Member States can choose from candidates from their own Member State that has generally joined a “European party” – federating the ideologically aligned parties in the Parliament.²⁰

4.2.3. Presidentialisation in the College

Kassim (2020, p. 12) sums up four reasons why, in his interpretation, the Nice Treaty (2002) has been the key moment, while the effects of this formal milestone have been gradual. By (a) giving the Commission President the power to define the Commission’s policy guidelines; (b) by explicitly recognising the Commission President’s pre-eminence within the College; (c) by granting the President authority over the organisation of the Commission; and (d) by giving the President the authority to appoint, dismiss and re-shuffle individual Commissioners. Continuing that “[o]perationalised through the Commission rules of procedure, they have given the Commission presidents control over the Commission’s policy and WPs” (p. 12).

Decision rules

The amount of institutional friction in terms of procedural limitations to the formation of a policy agenda that is sensitive to either public salience or other forms of information that enter the polity has likely decreased. The most pertinent reason for this would be the process of presidentialisation, where the central decision-maker is elevated from a “*primus inter pares*” to become a “*primus super pares*” (Egeberg, 2010; cf. Kurpas, Grøn & Kaczyński, 2008). Within the Commission’s internal decision-making process, the contentious issues that have not been resolved at the lower echelons of the Commission are lifted to the formally political level of the Commission in the last instance (Kassim, 2020, p. 5). The College strives to achieve consensus through bargaining and arguing. In the event this does not lead to a decision, voting may take place, although this seems to be rare (Egeberg, 2010, p. 129). The votes are, including the President, 1:1 weighted and decided with simple majority. In any case, the decision-making procedures are formally not public. Historically, the College operates on the basis of

²⁰ The biggest “European parties” are historically, and contemporaneously: EPP/ED (Christian Democrats), PES/S&D (Social Democrats), and ELDR/ALDE/Renew (Liberals).

“collegiality”²¹ meaning that all members are collectively responsible for the decisions taken. For this reason, Egeberg (2010) expects that a relatively large portion of all controversial decisions are taken at College level.

Preference heterogeneity in the College

Increases in membership size and changes in the political composition can be expected to have influenced the hurdles for the College to prioritisation. The College has grown with the expansion of the EU, which has, according to Lundgren et al. (2018), had a statistically positive effect on the degree of institutional friction. In Graph 1, the Colleges are quantified for an overview of the membership size. Before Barroso I (2004), the bigger Member States, UK, France, Italy, Spain, and Germany, took two seats in the College. The 2004 enlargement of 10 new members under Prodi without subsequent limitations to the membership size would have created a College of 30 Commissioners. However, the EU and College membership sizes have since been kept at a 1:1 ratio. This has supposedly led to problems in policymaking efficiency (Egeberg, 2010, p. 129).

Table 2 shows a cross-section of the political composition of the different Commissions. Firstly, the EPP and the PES dominate the different Commissions, followed by the ELDR. This dominance, combined with the decision-making process based on the principle of “collegiality” prompts expectations for a relatively stable College. Secondly, and much contrary to this, the 2004 expansion of Member States introduces a marked increase in heterogeneity. König (2007) finds that the relative preference heterogeneity among EU-Member States has affected the speed of decision-making over time, slowing down and reducing legislative decisions by the EU. Egeberg (2010, p 131) argues that nationality is likely to be a more crucial background factor to take into account in explaining Commissioner’s conduct (cf. Wonka, 2008) because national governments and lobbyists tend to contact “their” Commissioners first. However, Egeberg (2010) touches upon an uncertainty in the literature by stating that “like national ministers, Commissioners see multiple and often conflicting [informal] role expectations imposed upon them” (p. 131) – the party-political role remaining important too (Egeberg, 2006).

²¹ To symbolise that the College represented the general interests of the EU (Dimitrakopoulos and Kassim, 2005), the Commission’s first president, Walter Hallstein, determined that decisions should be taken collectively at a weekly meeting devoted to that purpose.

Finally, Deckarm (2017) confirms that both the relationship to the home country and the context in which a Commissioner works affect how the Commissioners form their Cabinets.

Table 2

The political composition of the College 1999-2021. ²²

| Term | 99-04 | 04-10 | 10-14 | 15-19 | 20-21 (24) |
|-----------------|----------|-----------|------------|---------|---------------|
| President | Prodi | Barroso I | Barroso II | Juncker | vd Leyen |
| EPP/ED | 8 | 9 | 13 | 15 | 10 |
| PES/ S&D | 10 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 9 |
| ELDR/ALDE/Renew | 4 | 8 | 8 | 5 | 5 |
| EGP | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Independent | 7 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| ECR | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| College total | 30 | 27 | 28 | 28 | 27 |
| MS total | 25 (15*) | 27 | 28 | 28 | 27 |

* *The Prodi Commission oversaw the 10 MS expansion in 2004 – the operational size of the College was 15*

4.2.4. Parliamentarisation of the College

The electoral process for the College and its President has parliamentarised, and in relation to internal reforms, this process too has presidentialised (Kassim, 2020, p. 7). After the Lisbon Treaty went into force in 2009, the candidate Commission President is selected – formally – by the (supranational) European Parliament and the intergovernmental Council following elections to the Parliament, with a system of *spitzenkandidaten*. This system prescribed that, in an effort to reinforce the parliamentary democratic legitimacy of the EU, the lead candidate of the winning European political group should be elected by the Parliament and the Council (Christiansen, 2016).²³ The confirmed President subsequently chooses members of the

²² The number of Commissioners counted at the end of the mandate; before the Barroso I College, bigger MS took two seats while smaller MS took only one.

²³ Although not fully in the scope of this paper, the 2019 European elections exposed that the *spitzenkandidaten* system was not supported by the Council, and could not be upheld. A new candidate was put forward by the Council.

Commission from the nominees put forward by the Member States.²⁴ Kassim (2020, p. 7) argues that “[t]he political standing of the individual concerned—the strength of his or her mandate, former positions held, and political experience—as well as the willingness of member governments to accept a steer, nominate more than one candidate, or put forward another name when the first is refused determines in practice how much discretion the Commission president-elect can exercise over the composition of his or her team.”

The process of parliamentarisation can be traced back to the Treaty of European Union (1992), which gave the Parliament the right to be consulted on the appointment of the President and the authority to approve the College. This was then reinforced by the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997-99), which gave the Parliament the right to approve President nominees. Therefore, the shift towards Parliamentary accountability can be seen as a gradual process where the Parliament gained increasing traction with the formation of the College, only culminating in the 2014 elections after which the five main parties insisted that, because the EPP had won more votes than any other party, they would veto any nomination by the European Council other than Jean-Claude Juncker, the EPP’s chosen candidate (Kassim, 2020).

In the end, the Council conceded to these pressures and selected by qualified majority the *spitzenkandidat*. Furthermore, beyond the election of the President, the Parliament “seized” greater powers over the appointment of members of the College through insertion of a process of “confirmation hearings” in its rules of procedure. The process of electoral presidentialisation can be traced back likewise to the Treaty of the European Union, which required governments to nominate other members of the Commission “in consultation with” the nominee for President. Subsequently, the Amsterdam Treaty changed this to the nomination “by common accord” (Kassim, 2020, p. 8). Under the Nice Treaty, the Commission president acquired the power not only to reshuffle individual commissioners but to oblige them to resign. Still, the Member States decide independently which nominees are put forward.

²⁴ President Ursula von der Leyen made it known in 2019 that she wanted a male and female candidate put forward, indicating that this process is to some degree controlled by the Commission President. Although it remains to be seen if this goes beyond gender representativeness criteria.

4.2.5. Fundamental shifts in the Parliament

The political composition of the Parliament fluctuates in the period under investigation, but by and large shifts in favour of Eurosceptic parties after Barroso II. Although the “grand coalition” of the EPP and the PES remained significantly larger than the different “Eurosceptic” parties (i.e. ECR, EDD/ID), individually and combined, it is safe to say the shift caused a political signal (Treib, 2021; Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). The Parliament composition plotted in Figure 1 shows a steady increase in heterogeneity and increasing volatility in the reconfiguration of the composition after elections. In other words, there is reason to believe that political signals from the Parliament existed in the period under investigation, with increasing intensity. The grand coalition parties, PES and the EPP, historically a majority, steadily lose control, with a marked loss of seats after the 2014 election, repeated in the 2019 elections (Treib, 2021). Notably, the EDD/NI and ECR, both Eurosceptic, combined won relatively many seats in both the 2009 and 2014 elections.

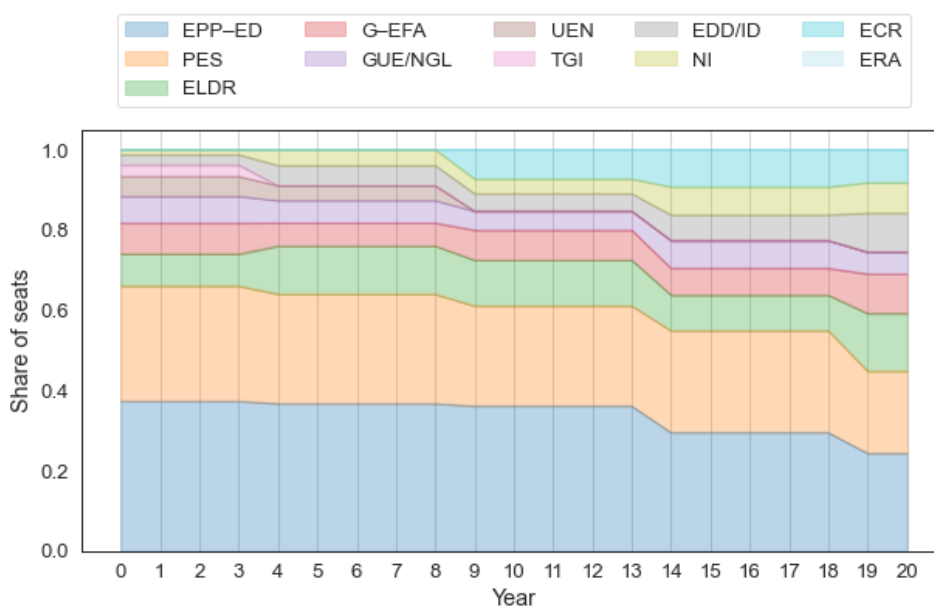


Figure 1 Composition of the Parliament, 2000-2020

5. FORMING THE HYPOTHESIS

Based on the body of literature selected for the case description and the synthesised theoretical framework, this chapter initiates the shift in this thesis from forming expectations to testing the theorisations. The following will draw expectations that are to be tested in the empirical study of the College's policy agenda in the analysis in chapter 9.

5.1. What expectations can be drawn?

Friction in the College comes from either internal and external institutional factors. These factors have a longitudinal development, and by design, a cyclical component. Over time, the process of presidentialisation can be expected to make the President's agenda (and sensitivity) more responsive to external fundamentals, such as power relations, and events. Coinciding with that longitudinal development, the process of parliamentarisation can be expected to be of a more cyclical nature where the elections are followed by recurrent frictional patterns. It must be noted that, although the hypotheses are built on this conceptual framework, the reality is likely more convoluted because the degree to which the Commission, the Parliament and the Council have integrated their operations has become increasingly ambiguous (e.g. Nakshbande, 2020; Egeberg, Gornitzka & Trondal, 2014). Nevertheless, there is sufficient ground to start from this supposition. In the literature, the Council is generally attributed the role of political agenda setter, speaking on behalf of the national governments and parliaments, the Commission a more "science driven" agenda setter, giving technical clout to the EU's political agenda, and the Parliament is discounted in its agenda-setting role (Eggermont 2012, p. 109; Höing & Wessels, 2013; Wessels, 2016; Kassim, 2020).

The case description shows a College with increasingly convoluted and manifold accountability links, which can, from a logical point of reasoning, be expected to increase the level of institutional friction. Moreover, elections of the College, and the mere effect of a *new* mandate for the College, could increasingly give impetus to change the College's policy agenda to the preferences of its political leadership due to presidentialisation. At the same time, parliamentary election outcomes, the effect of what people voted, could be expected to increasingly move the College, or at least some of its members, to respond to the outcomes and "feel more motivated" to become policy entrepreneurs, expressed in changes in priorities. Still, signals for change depend on the nature of the electoral signal. Fundamental shifts should be

reflected in the Commission's policy priorities accordingly, but because institutional obstructions interfere in that process, this could be observed with a time lag. Alternatively, the College are not sensitive enough to the parliamentary outcomes to respond and change the policy agenda accordingly.

5.2. The hypotheses

The hypotheses are drawn from these suppositions as follows. Firstly, the *null* hypothesis is lifted from Nakshbande's (2020, p. 84) conclusions. Secondly, the mandate effect serves to capture the College's responsiveness to parliamentary election outcomes, testing the hypotheses as postulated for democratic systems. Thirdly, the tailored concepts from Lundgren et al. (2018) for measuring institutional friction in IOs serve to capture possible effects from institutional friction in the College on its responsiveness to the institutional cycle. This accounts for the synchronous institutional cycles of both the College and the Parliament. Critically, confirming the *H1* and/or *H2* hypothesis would not disprove associations found by confirming *H0* but evidence an omitted confounder in the framework proposed by Nakshbande (2020) but also more broadly in PET.

H0 An increase in the attention paid to a policy domain on the Council agenda is associated with an increase in the attention paid to the same domain on the Commission agenda (see Nakshbande, 2020; Elias, 2019; Alexandrova, 2014).

H1 Over time, the parliamentary elections are increasingly followed by a higher-than-average aggregate change in attention on the Commission agenda in the first possible instance of policy prioritisation after an election (see Polsby, 1984; Breeman et al., 2009).

H2 Over time, a higher maturity of the Commission mandate is increasingly associated with a higher-than-average aggregate change in attention on the Commission agenda (see Polsby, 1984; Breeman et al., 2009).

5.3. Critical assumptions

The hypothesised suppositions are based on a critical assumption that there is no significant direct link between the outcome of the parliamentary elections and the subsequent distribution of seats according to political affiliation in the College, and that public salience is not directly and significantly linked with the outcome of the elections. While these assumptions are expectations based on the considerable body of literature selected for the case description, if they are in fact false this would lead to additional complexities in the theoretical framework. Firstly, in associating political developments in the Parliament, external to the College, with the College agenda, the political composition of College would possibly not be a mediator *of* – instead being caused *by* – the electoral outcomes. This would evoke expectations of a stronger and more direct mandate effect because the electoral outcome would by design be reflected in the composition of the College. However, due to the Member States' prerogative to select College candidates, the mediating factor of the political composition of the College is likely not directly linked to the election outcomes (Kassim, 2020). Secondly, a direct linkage between public salience and electoral outcomes would negate some of the additional value of measuring electoral outcomes separately. If public salience would be directly and significantly linked to the outcome of the elections, the elections could be merely a quinquennial, meaning every 5 years, release of information about public salience.²⁵ Blondel and Thiebault (1988) and Laver and Budge (1992) provide an explanation, based on rational theory, why salience or electoral outcomes are not simply mirrored in actions.

²⁵ This would be similar to a Eurobarometer report on public salience in the EU, but then accompanied with a lot of additional symbolism and ceremony. See Marsh (2020) for an in depth analysis of the specificities of the EU electoral system and Breeman et al. (2009) for an example of executive responsiveness to national electoral processes.

6. RESEARCH DESIGN

In this segment, the goal of the empirical enquiry is framed, subsequently the strategy for inference and approximation, and finally a description of and justification for the data collection. Key elements are the approach to the CAP and the reformatting exercise to shape the independent and control variables to the dependent variable's chronology.

This thesis set out to answer the question: when and under which conditions is the policy agenda of the College of Commissioners of the EU marked by inertia or by openness to change? The subsequent theoretical framework structured the case description of the developments in the College, from which expectations have been drawn for what these developments likely entail for the level of punctuation in the College's policy agenda. This segment sets out to answer whether the hypothesised holds true empirically, through approximations, and thus answers if (*H1*) the parliamentary elections are increasingly followed by a higher-than-average degree of "openness to change" on the Commission's annual policy agenda, and (*H2*) to what extent and under what conditions any such mandate effect is sticky. However, due to the reformatting of the timeseries data, the first step will be to (*H0*) test the association between attention in the Council and the subsequent Commission policy agenda.

This approach builds further on Nakshbande's (2020) pioneering work, and therefore a similar longitudinal approach is operationalised. However, some key alterations and complements are made to fit the specific goals of this thesis. Finally, to test the theory, descriptive statistics are applied to the operationalised variables. Primarily, this empirical enquiry should give indications if, and to what extent, the College has become sensitive and responsive to parliamentary elections outcomes, considered as measurable fluctuations in policy issues in the subsequent mandate, measured as the different levels of "maturity" of the College in the five-year College mandates. In this sense, the higher maturity level implies that the College has had time to find a *modus operandi* to address hurdles that formed hindrances to changing the priorities.

6.1. The research strategy and approximations

The subject of this design is the policy agenda of the College; approximated though the annual Commission WPs this serves as dependent variable. Mirroring the approach in Nakshbande (2020, p. 38), the independent variable is the policy agenda of the Council; approximated

through Council Conclusions aggregated between WP publications. This allows for a quantitative analysis. The openness to change is expressed in a relatively high number of gradual, meaning neither high nor low, changes in the distribution of attention for topic areas. Drawing from techniques used in Baumgartner et al. (2009; 2012), Breeman et al. (2009) and Lundgren et al. (2018), the concept of openness to change is measured through comparing frequency distributions of change per topic area where “fat tails” combined with “narrow peaks” are associated with inertia, and anything closer to a normal distribution with more openness to change.

The control variable that aims to measure the existence and extent of a democratic mandate effect is approximated through the European parliamentary election occurrences and outcomes. The latter takes shape as a development, electoral shifts per political group in the Parliament. The second control variable, “mandate maturity”, approximates the theorised regularities in decreasing institutional friction, conceptualised as the willingness and ability to adapt to external signals (cf. Lundgren et al., 2018, p. 553). Additionally, the third control variable, preference heterogeneity, is approximated through an account of the explicit nominal political affiliations of the College members. Both the membership size and heterogeneity in political affiliations could be confounding the level to which friction decreases or increases, independently from the independent variable and the first two control variables.

Furthermore, a conscious decision is made to exclude theorised confounding variables of socio-economic development and public salience for topic areas. Although these developments are certainly integrated through historical accounts, their quantification would arguably not increase accuracy reliably (cf. Nakshbande, 2020, p. 50; Alexandrova, 2014, p. 103; Toshkov, 2011, p. 173). Public salience for topic areas has been omitted as a variable in this strategy because of the considerable lack of robustness of the status-quo in measuring public salience at the aggregate EU-level (Nakshbande, 2020, p. 80; Toshkov, 2011, p. 186), likewise for the Council’s sensitivity (Alexandrova et al., 2016, p. 622). An attempt to reduce this uncertainty is beyond the scope of this thesis. Table 3 serves as a visual representation of this strategy.

Table 3

The research design

| Dependent Variable: the College policy agenda | |
|---|--|
| <i>Internal source:</i> | <i>External source:</i> |
| Mandate maturity (CV II) | The Council policy agenda (IV) |
| Preference heterogeneity (CV III) | Parliamentary composition (CV I) |
| Decision rules (historical accounts) | Public Saliency (historical accounts) <i>conf.</i> |

CV (Control Variable); IV (Independent Variable)

6.1.1. Data sourcing, collection and formatting

This segment elaborates on the selected approaches for sourcing, collecting and formatting data for optimal variable approximation. This starts off by justifying the most appropriate proxy for the College’s attention to policy issues, and by juxtaposing this to proxies for the independent variable and the control variables. The rationale that sets out the framework for the construction of the collected datasets of the Commission WPs from 2000-2019, and the Council Conclusions from 1999-2018 is based on the methodology of the EU Policy Agendas Project. Additionally, the same applies for the 2020 WP and the 2019 Council Conclusions that have been coded for this thesis to complete the datasets for the chosen timeframe.

Approximating the Commission’s policy agenda

Generally, the Commission annually publishes a WP in which it outlines the “priorities and key initiatives” for the upcoming year (European Commission, 2005). The WPs emerged as part of a broader process of institutional reform under the rubric of Strategic Planning and Programming (SPP) within the Commission aimed at improving EU governance after the Santer Commission resignations in 1999 and the subsequent “Kinnock Reforms” (Kreppel & Oztas, 2017, p. 1126). Nakshbande’s (2020) dataset of the Commission’s WPs comprises all publications between 2000-2019 (WP for 2000-2019), coded according to the EU Policy Agendas Project codebook. This is a sound approach because it is still imperative to apply the identical EU-version of the CAP codebook to the European Commission’s equivalent of European Council Conclusions in order to subsequently consistently operationalise the Council policy agenda as control variable.

Nakshbande (2020) makes a case for using the WPs as a proxy for Commission (College) policy attention based on convenience, comparability, and methodological arguments. COM-documents are held in lower regard because “it is highly unlikely that the European Commission can take heed of the European Council priorities, draft legislation, present it to the Council of Ministers and European Parliament, implement it, and report back within the time frame of a single year” (Nakshbande, 2020, p. 42; cf. Osnabrügge, 2015, p. 251). Instead, WPs “provide a politically binding overview of the confirmed and finite range of priorities for the European Commission in the subsequent year”, thus they are “intrinsically *prospective*, just like the European Council Conclusions” (Nakshbande, 2020, p. 41).

Moreover, their contents are supplemented with aligned annexes that sum-up the legislative actions to address the legislative priorities (Kreppel & Oztas, 2017). Finally, Kreppel and Oztas conclude their justification for using the WPs as approximation by stating that they “believe that the WPs provide a ‘best case scenario’ for the agenda-setting power of the Commission” (2017, p. 1127). Moreover, the WPs are intended as a “stocktaking exercise”, which is the product of an “inter-institutional dialogue” with other institutions including the Council and the Parliament (European Commission, 2005). However, the publication of College priorities in the WP can be expected to serve some symbolic purpose where the College displays to the Council, the Parliament and the to a lesser extent to the public that it “responds” to political signals, i.e. public salience, power relations in the Council or between the institutions, or indeed the electoral outcomes (Kreppel & Oztas, 2017, pp. 1125-1128). This could be exacerbated in periods directly following elections or after an incubation time of change.

Finally, whereas the WPs have been lengthy and “dry” in the early years of such publications, the later ones have been published as political strategies that – arguably – have become more readable for the general public. Seen as communication tools, while the agendas show what the College has prioritised, the full story should still include a reflection of what the College intended. A good reference could be the titles of the WPs. To that end, the absence of a title for the WPs up until the one for 2006 already indicates that perhaps the nature of the WPs has changed over time. Barroso I presented their agendas as “Unlocking Europe’s full potential” (2006) and “Acting now for a better Europe” (2009), Barroso II titled only one; “Time to act” (2010), Juncker was the first College to title all WPs; “A New Start” (2015), “No time for business as usual” (2016), “Delivering a Europe that protects, empowers and defends” (2017), “An agenda for a more united, stronger and more democratic Europe” (2018),

“Delivering what we promised and preparing for the future” (2019), and Von der Leyen signalled yet more ambition with “A Union that strives for more” (2020). The titles remain, however, limited in explanatory value, and are arguably rather ambiguous.

Approximating the Council’s policy agenda

The Conclusions are the best approximation of the Council policy agenda, and the attention distribution, for this research design because they explicitly aim to “influence and guide the EU’s policy agenda” by means of outlining the Heads of State and Governments’ (HSG) agreement on key priorities and policies to be pursued (European Council, 2018). They are published by the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers after every scheduled European Council summit. For the Council Conclusions too the EU Policy Agendas Project has been instrumental. Firstly, the dataset of Council Conclusions, which comprises all European Council Conclusions from 1975 – this thesis starts with 1999 – to 2014 (Alexandrova, 2017, p. 762; Alexandrova et al., 2014) has been collected from the online database. Secondly, the counted topics for the Conclusions between 2015 to 2018 have been collected from Nakshbande’s work (Nakshbande, 2020, p. 38). And finally, the 2019 Council Conclusions have been coded using the codebook. To reiterate, much of what has been discussed pertaining to the data collection for the College policy agenda similarly applies to the Council Conclusions by the key virtue that they are comparable to the WPs in their set-up, purpose, and availability.

Similar to the WPs, Nakshbande (2020, p. 40) acknowledges that the Council Conclusions are inherently “an approximation of what has been debated within the European Council” (Alexandrova et al., 2014), as both the agenda and the deliberations remain confidential (Puetter, 2013, p. 7). However, “Conclusions generally provide a reliable, consistent, albeit imperfect gauge of the European Council agenda which is reproducible for purposes of future research efforts” (Nakshbande, 2020, p. 40). Some choices have had to be made regarding the selection of Council meetings to integrate into the dataset. Two considerations have guided the selection for the 2019 Council meetings: remaining consistent with Nakshbande (2020) and Alexandrova (2014) and the focus on comparability of the nature of the document to the WPs. Therefore, “mentions of policy issues are included insofar as they culminated into publicly available Conclusions or a comparable statement which could be coded” (Nakshbande, 2020, p. 45). The author of the used sources for 2015-2018 has been consulted to this end to provide the required consistency. As such annexes to Council Conclusions have been included because they contain original policy content. Finally, a point of caution for future researchers aiming to use this approach would be that the Council

Conclusions from 2020 are potentially more challenging to use consistently as an approximation of reality due to the 2020 pandemic related informal, video meetings (EPRS, 2020).

Finally, departing from Nakshbande's approach, the unemployment rate is not incorporated separately, instead taken as being mediated through the Council. The reasoning behind this comes from the fact that the Council has the formal duty to consider the unemployment rate in its priorities (Article 148 TFEU). Therefore, it is assumed these changes are embedded in both historic socio-economic events and the Council Conclusions. The principle extends to the rationale for excluding government debt levels, something Nakshbande expresses as "looming multicollinearity" (2020, p. 51). The many external factors that affect the responsive activity of the Council are near impossible to disentangle – certainly not within this thesis.

Reformatting from annual intervals to mandate intervals

The greatest effort in data collection has been made in the collection and coding of the Commission WPs published between 2000-2019 by Nakshbande (2020). Attempting to contribute to this ongoing project of documentation²⁶, the subsequently available year, 2020, has been coded to increase the measured population, albeit marginally by 5%. Critically, the dataset, collegially provided by Nakshbande (2020), has been reformatted from annual intervals, where every 01 January marks the subsequent period of observation, to mandate-intervals where every first day of the mandate of the College marks the subsequent period of observations. On the one hand, this strategy is better suited for this research goal, focussed on the electoral cycle, and on the other hand, this strategy aims to provide a better alignment – reflecting the real state of the world – with the independent and control variables more generally.

For example, the decision-makers partaking in the inter-institutional negotiations that led up to the publication of the WPs are held not on an annual basis but based on the contemporary ruling mandate. In Table 4 the inaugural dates and dates of discharge of the Colleges in the period of interest are listed. It becomes clear that, although generally aligned to the annotated annum of the Council Conclusions, the mandate period and the period of publication of the WPs and the Council Conclusions, there are exceptions. For instance in the

²⁶ Nakshbande (2020, p. 39) notes that "[t]he dataset is structured in such a way to facilitate easy expansion and replication efforts by future scholars."

year 2010, when the 2010 WP was published only in March that same year, while the 2011 WP was published in October the same year, too.

The datasets sourced have been adjusted using the new interval dates. Firstly, for the (annual) Council data between 1999-2014 (i.e. from the EU Policy Agendas Project by Alexandrova et al., 2014), every value of individual observations of a policy issue at quasi-sentence level has been recounted between the WP intervals. This was possible due to the annotated quasi-sentences in the dataset. Subsequently, because for 2014-2019 (i.e. Nakshbande, 2020) the counts of observations per topic area at the quasi-sentence level was only available as integer counts, instead of the annotated quasi-sentence content, the annual number of observations per policy issue (= n) has been extrapolated using the following method. The Council Conclusions (CC) that fall within a given WP interval are counted. The rationale here is that Council Conclusion aggregate counts of the attention levels for that period as sourced from Nakshbande for a given calendar year (i.e. between 2014-2019) are extrapolated to the ratio that this period extends into the previous or subsequent WP interval. For every Council Conclusion, the n is multiplied by the ratio of that Council Conclusion compared to the total of Council Conclusions in that Working programme interval. For example, between the publication of the Working Programme for 2015 and the publication of the Working Programme for 2016, one Council Conclusion was published in 2014, and five in 2015.²⁷ Therefore, the key is:

$$n \text{ CC for interval WP 16 (between WP 16-17)} = n_{2014} * (1/6) + n_{2015} * (5/6)$$

Both the Council Conclusions and the WPs have been built on Nakshbande's (2020) work, and by extension on the EU Policy Agendas Project. While for the period 1999-2014 the EU Policy Agendas Project has been selected as the source for the coded Council Conclusions, for the period covering 2015-2019, Nakshbande's (2020) dataset serves as the source for the coded Council Conclusions. Therefore, the EU Policy Agendas Project coding method applies to the accounts of the collection and coding strategy for the College policy agenda, the WPs, and the Council policy agenda, the Conclusions. Finally, although this should give a more accurate representation of who was "at the negotiating table", it must be noted that making inferences of policymakers' priorities is limited by innumerable factors, including the fact that

²⁷ In annex I the full tabled set of calculations used for the reformatting exercise can be found.

any personal expression of priorities is indeed nothing more than an expression of a cognitive process that remains obscure. Thus, the approximation is inherently limited in its ability to reflect the real state of the world.

Table 4

The WPs

| For: | <i>Publication:</i> | For: | <i>Publication:</i> |
|------|---------------------|--------|---------------------|
| 2000 | 07-02-2000 | 2011 | 27-10-2010 |
| 2001 | 31-01-2001 | 2012 | 15-11-2011 |
| 2002 | 05-12-2001 | 2013 | 23-10-2012 |
| 2003 | 30-10-2002 | 2014 | 22-10-2013 |
| 2004 | 29-10-2003 | 2015 | 16-12-2014 |
| 2005 | 26-01-2005 | 2016 | 27-10-2015 |
| 2006 | 25-10-2005 | 2017 | 25-10-2016 |
| 2007 | 01-01-2007 | 2018 | 24-10-2017 |
| 2008 | 23-10-2007 | 2019 | 23-10-2018 |
| 2009 | 05-11-2008 | 2020-1 | 29-01-2020 |
| 2010 | 31-03-2010 | | |

6.1.2. Working with the EU Policy Agendas Project

The EU Policy Agendas Project, which is rooted in the CAP, assumes that “attention to issues can be measured via the occurrence of these issues” on an agenda. The attention for, or frequency of mentions of, various policy areas “is taken as an indicator of [their] status on the agenda” (Alexandrova et al., 2014, p. 155). The EU Policy Agendas online open-source database is built around the central dataset containing the Council Conclusions, with the content and the context coded, between 1974-2014. The Council conclusions have been coded at the “quasi-sentence level”, which means that each meaningful dependent clause of a sentence with unique policy content is encoded by manually assigning it one of 21 thematic codes, numbered 1-23, skipping 11 and 22. This standardised methodology allows for “systematic comparisons across time, issues, and policymaking venues” are possible (Alexandrova et al., 2014, p. 156). Furthermore, whereas a more fine-grained account would have benefitted a research goal focused on the individual policy level, the macro-level inference of policy change can likely reliably be operationalised through an account of the topic area counts.

Still, the methodology must be taken with some reservations. The codebook, like other CAP codebooks, hinges on the right balance between comparability and sufficient approximation – this is noticeable.²⁸ The paradox here is that longitudinal comparability can improve from rigor in application of the codebook, while simultaneously renders the codebook less applicable over time as institutions and semantics change. To this end, the codebook's 21 major topics are subdivided into 250 subtopics, which all contain relatively detailed instructions, taking account of the particularities of EU policymaking. When it comes to semantic differentiation, this leads to methodological problems in virtually any conceivable comparative account of text. Case in point is that accurate and reliable machine (learning), automated coding programmes are not commonplace without having rigorous controls in place. In exploration of the optimal research design and data collection methods, the use of machine learning programmes has been probed. Nonetheless, the key issue with reliability of machine learning is that these functions, such as “SpaCy”, which use “vector based” Latent Dirichlet allocation or cosine similarity lose accuracy exponentially with reduced dataset sizes. The datasets for this thesis are not large enough to justify an application of these methods. Other automated approaches in Lundgren et al. (2018) show insufficient merit to prioritise over manual coding.

6.1.3. Description of the coded policy agendas data sets

The data that has been made available for the College WPs (2000-2019) and the Council Conclusions (2015-2018) does not contain the coded content of the official documents, instead providing the counts of the different issues as per the EU Policy Agendas Project codebook. Therefore, the assumption is made for the analysis and conclusion of this thesis that the coding has been conducted rigorously, consistently and deliberately. The datasets from the work done by Nakshbande (2020) have been coded on the 21 “major topic level”, and thus to be consistent so has the additional 2020 WP, and the additional 2019 set of Council Conclusions. Nakshbande (2020) provides a sample of his method for coding the complex and ambiguous content of the WPs in sample 1. Considering the granularity of this coding on the “quasi-sentence” level, this method has been replicated to the missing data for 2019. Sample 2 is an example from the 2020 WP.

²⁸ The codebook clearly shows that the context of its composition is one of Euro crisis and Brexit. A renewed concerted effort could update this codebook to better account for 2010-20.

Sample 1

Specific work is also required to combat discrimination | and promote gender equality, | encourage labour mobility, | anticipate the problems associated with restructuring, | and to launch a debate on how to tackle the problem of the Union's aging population (European Commission, 2005).

Sample 2

The need for a strong and united European Union, | drawing on all of its diplomatic, | economic | and political assets is more evident and more important than ever. This is reflected in the Work Programme of this Geopolitical Commission. | All actions and initiatives planned will have a strong focus on external action (European Commission, 2019).

All in all, this method provides the research design with sufficient rigor; there is arguably no apparent better method, such as large scale elite interviews, for approximating these variables that serve the goal of this research design. However, inherent to an “approximation” is that it is no direct representation of the reality, in this case what has been discussed between the Commissioners, let alone what thoughts have crossed their mind (cf. Alexandrova et al., 2014). Far from being a reason to discount this method, the elusive, or even secretive, character of the College in particular and the EU policy system in general justifies this innovative attempt.

6.1.4. Approximating democratic mandate effects

To measure signals from elections and the effects thereof on the College, the most obvious source for approximation is the primary source; publicly available European election results. While the seats in the Parliament are distributed relatively proportionately to the electoral size of the Member States, the voter turnout can diverge per Member State per election. Yet because the significance of the political affiliation of Commissioners, and thus not the voter representation, is relevant for this research design, this should not be problematic. As a precaution, the total voter turnout will be added as metadata to the dataset as to control for major fluctuations. The research design in question covers the 1999-2019 timeframe, and thus the European elections of 13 June 1999, 13 June 2004, 7 June 2009, 25 May 2014, and 26 May 2019 are of interest. The electoral results and voter turnout of European the elections have been

sourced from the Parliament website (European Parliament, 2021). The dataset comprises percentages of Parliamentary seats occupied by European federated political parties. It shows that several parties are consistently, significantly bigger than the rest of the parties, and that some negligible parties serve only one term. Therefore, the seats for the Technical Group of Independents and the European Radical Alliance are omitted.

6.1.5. Approximating preference heterogeneity

The decision for approximation of preference heterogeneity through political affiliation of Commissioners instead of counting the number of nationalities and indexing the national preferences (i.e. Lundgren et al., 2018) is based on an assumed strong positive correlation in the College between member size and preference heterogeneity – an increase in one leads almost certainly to an increase in the other. This is key to the conceptual purpose of preference heterogeneity because increases in opposition are expected to lead to irresponsiveness.

In this case, the count per political affiliation reflects better the potential changes in preference heterogeneity because the 1:1 Member State representation results in a constancy in nationally specific preference heterogeneity, assuming no dramatic changes at the national level. With the exception of the 2004 enlargement and very marginal exceptions when seats have been empty due to the lack of an appointee, this has been relatively constant. Furthermore, the punctuated instances of expansion serve this purpose well. Alternatively, neglecting the political affiliations would have bypassed observations of the much more dynamic political composition of the College. For the political affiliation of the Commissioners, the data has been sourced from official Commission primary sources, namely: European Commission (2010a); European Commission (2010b); European Commission (2014a); European Commission (2014b); and European Commission (2019a).

7. OPERATIONALISATION

This chapter elaborates on the strategy for quantitation and choices made in that respect, aiming for consistency with the previous work on which this thesis builds further and attempts at improvement where possible. What follows in chapter 8 are the quantitative techniques and methods that are subsequently applied to the datasets within the framework of the research design.

7.1. The dependent variable

The dependent variable is the attention given in the College per policy topic, per WP mandate²⁹. Replicating the coding method executed for the dependent variable in Nakshbande (2020, p. 45), “this variable is constructed by attributing each quasi-sentence in the selected range of WPs a code corresponding to one of the 21 major policy issues of the EU Policy Agendas project.” As this thesis is interested in the distribution of attention to each individual policy area and the aggregate thereof, the dependent variable is a fraction or proportion, thus this variable may take any value between 0 and 1. Additionally, the absolute counts, an integer value, of policy mentions and the aggregate thereof are accounted for to facilitate robustness checks (cf. Jones and Baumgartner, 2005, pp. 201-202). When an issue is counted as a 0, this means there has been no attention granted to that issue within the WP, and when it is counted as a 1, the issue has received all available attention in within the WP. To maintain methodological and operational consistency with the sourced data, “Mentions of policy issues in the preface and annex of WPs, which respectively outline achieved objectives and provide the details [and thus not the announcement] of legislative acts to be undertaken, are excluded from the analysis” (Nakshbande, 2020, p. 45). On the one hand, the author’s claim that “they contain no original policy” is defensible, while on the other hand, the purpose given to annexes and prefaces may have changed over time. Nevertheless, again, to maintain consistency, this approach is replicated for the 2020 WP.

²⁹ i.e. starting from the publication of the WP up until the publication of the subsequent WP.

7.2. The independent variable

Measuring and comparing Council Conclusions tests the *null* hypothesis with the reformatted dataset of the Council Conclusions for association with the dependent variable. This variable has been operationalised before in other settings (Nakshbande, 2020; Alexandrova, Rasmussen & Toshkov, 2016, p. 606; Alexandrova et al., 2014). The aggregated Council Conclusion dataset is compared with the WPs after alignment to the intervals between WP publications. The aim of that strategy is to construct a more representative sample of the allocated attention per policy area in the Council. Mirroring the operationalisation of the dependent variable, the first independent variable is a fraction or a proportion. Additionally, the absolute counts, an integer value, of policy mentions and the aggregate thereof are accounted for to facilitate robustness checks (cf. Jones and Baumgartner, 2005, pp. 201-202). All the Conclusions published in an interval period are aggregated into one file to provide a complete picture of the attention distribution for that given year. In order to operationalise a comparative account of the College's and the Council's attention distribution in a given year, this approach is the best alternative. For instance, taking the averages of policy count proportions, per Conclusion, would provide a distorted picture as the Council Conclusions vary greatly in size (Alexandrova, 2014, p. 40; Alexandrova, 2015a, pp. 23–24; cf. Nakshbande, 2020, p. 46). According to Nakshbande (2020), this approach reveals more about patterns and regularities in the Council's prioritisation of policy areas than a single Conclusion. This is enhanced by the expectation that the annual counts decrease the likelihood of potential *auto-correlation* effects in the form of “agenda inheritance” to a similar level as for the College (cf. Alexandrova, 2014, p. 103.).

7.3. Control variables

The control variables are a mix of historical accounts coupled with descriptive statistics to provide additional accuracy to the analysis. In brief, the variables operationalised control for coinciding events that form an alternative explanation for any higher degree of change 1.) between the WPs, potentially cyclical, and 2.) longitudinal, over the course of the College's history.

7.3.1. The democratic mandate

The primary research goal is to measure the effects of the parliamentary composition. To measure this, the European election outcomes serve as the independent variable. The independent variable is operationalised to test the mandate effect. European election outcomes are measured by counting the seats per party for each Parliamentary mandate and subsequently counting the total of the percentual changes in the proportion of seats per party, per WP interval. These election outcomes are punctuated every 5 years (1999, 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019) near the actual elections held throughout the EU. The purpose of this independent variable is to infer the effect of a change in the Parliament seat distribution – and not the political context of the individual countries – on the College attention distribution. This should be noted because although the European elections are held at the national level, where the electorate votes for national candidates, parties, and by extension nationally specific narratives, the results at the aggregated European level would not serve well as a proxy for developments in national sentiment.³⁰

The categorisation of the parties the ideological preferences matters for the research goal. For example, an increase in seats for Eurosceptic parties is arguably a stronger signal for the College than the classically pro-EU parties. Finally, although the mandate effect could theoretically constitute an effect that is separated to some degree from public salience³¹, the federated parties can be expected to base their political priorities on the perceived salience among their electorates.

7.3.2. Mandate maturity

For the sensitivity and responsiveness analyses, the incubation time of change is not determined ex-ante processing of the data, instead providing a comprehensive cross-section of the College's priorities in instances lagged vis-a-vis the "signals" from the independent variable occurring after elections (cf. Breeman et al., 2009, pp. 19-20). In Nakshbande (2020), due to the limitations in the inferential statistical approach, the scope is more constrained and defers from Aleksandrova's (2014). The latter author's approach, where half a year of lag is identified

³⁰ For instance, take the hypothetical situation where in Italy Eurosceptic sentiment is at an all-time high, while in Germany European integration is viewed positively. In this situation, the College can be expected to respond with fewer proposals (in any case in areas where the EU has less competence), while Eurosceptic seats would be cancelled out by pro-integration seats at the elections.

³¹ Perhaps especially in case of a second-order election, e.g. Marsh, 2020

as the “standard lag used in political responsiveness studies”; is replaced by a year’s delay in the inferential model in Nakshbande (2020, p. 49).

For operationalisation in this thesis, the mandate-intervals serve as the natural lag intervals for the cross-section, creating an irregular yet arguably more accurate measure of the “level of maturity”, which corresponds better to the research goal where the institutional peculiarities of the College are central.³² The incubation time for electoral signals to be observable in political priorities of the executive could well be that of one, two, three, four, or even five opportunities to push for priorities, i.e. in WPs, to finalise or gradually deprioritise inherited policy issues (cf. Alexandrova, 2014, p. 101). Additionally, the cross-section captures the possible responsiveness to historical events, such as drastic changes in GDP, migration, energy crisis. Elias (2019, p. 151) argues that this could well be a structural phenomenon, too (cf. Toshkov, 2011, p. 186). Finally, this approach would give an indication to what extent there is an autocorrelation effect, where issues are inherited from the preceding observation.

7.3.3. Preference heterogeneity

An alternative additional control variable is created taking shape as heterogeneity in the College, a strategy informed to a large degree by Lundgren et al (2018) and Baumgartner et al. (2009). The level of institutional friction of the College will be accounted for by measuring the number of College members taking stock of the preference heterogeneity by counting the seat distribution in the College per political party. For the operationalisation of the preference heterogeneity variable, developments will be taken stock of using an absolute count and a proportion per WP interval. Finally, shifts in member size are punctuated in years of EU-expansion [contraction] (2004, 2007, 2013 [2020])³³. Shifts in the political composition are punctuated every 5 years (1999, 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019) in close proximity to the Parliamentary elections.

³² It would seem counterintuitive to think that the Commissioners negotiate their priorities according to calendar years, instead working towards political milestones.

³³ The exit of the UK from the EU has not been taken into account here as, even though the UK has not provided a new Commissioner in the Von der Leyen mandate, this timeframe does not allow for these effects to be measured.

8. METHODOLOGY

This chapter lays out the techniques and methods used for quantitative analysis. To this end, the collected data for the dependent variable, the WPs, and the second control variable, the Council Conclusions, are equally large in observations. The unit of analysis is a given policy area in a given WP interval, which over the period 1999-2020, 21 years, for 21 policy areas adds up to and N of observations of 441 per variable respectively. The independent variable, the Parliamentary elections, occurs five times in the given timeframe, with a counted number of parties of eleven over the whole period gives a N of observations of 55. For the second control variable, preference heterogeneity in the College, the units of analysis are similarly the electoral years as they are synchronous. Here, the number of counted parties over the whole period, counting independents as one party, is six, producing a N of observations of 30. Based on these results, the considerable difference in N of observations for the dependent variable and the second control variable with the independent and first control variable lead to a mixed approach for the analysis where the former facilitates a more granular approach, and the latter demands greater supplementation with historical accounts and alternative, innovative quantitative methods.

The programme that has been used for the analysis is Python, which is an open-source programming language that has become increasingly popular in several areas of science, including political science. The programme provides several benefits. While “Stata is another software used for data analysis, primarily in the soft sciences such as political science... Python offers many add-on programs” (Ozgur, Colliau, Rogers & Hughes, 2017, pp. 367-369), such as Pandas analytics. Additionally, Python facilitates transparency due to the traceability of the most minute decisions in the codebooks, Jupyter in this case, replicability because the code can be rerun by anyone while allowing for built-in controls and explanatory notes, and improvability due to the flexibility in the code that follows from its object-oriented semantics. With the open-source Comparative Agendas Project in mind, this approach provides clear added value.³⁴

³⁴ For future replication or further application, see in Annex III to access the code

8.1. Answering the research question

The research question prompts the need for a mixed approach. This section elaborates on the descriptive statistics that have been applied to the dataset to come to graphical and numeric representations of the variables, the development of the variables, and the relationship between the variables. The three hypotheses are guiding but the results inform a more integrated analysis.

8.1.1. *H0* - The correlation between the Council and the College

To calculate the correlation between institutions, this method will have to deviate from the intra-institutional focus common to many punctuated equilibrium research efforts, like Breeman et al. (2009) and Lundgren et al. (2014). Instead, the work done by Nakshbande (2020) provides solid ground for a sound method that captures the inter-institutional dynamics that characterise the “co-legislators” of the EU. Additionally, the purpose of calculating these correlations is twofold. Not only does the inference provide a control for openness to change in the different instances of WPs in Commission terms, this model also attempts to increase the accuracy of the interinstitutional inferential model with the College as the dependent variable.

Firstly, the operationalisation of the variables is fundamentally divergent from the approach in Nakshbande (2020). As a reminder, this research design moves away from the calendar year and takes the WP intervals, the dependent variable, as the basis for building the models. This is done to avoid unintentionally measuring differences in the number of mentions in a WP *before* either a Council Conclusion has been published or an external event has occurred. The nominal years for which WPs are published do not always correspond to the period in which they are drafted and negotiated. Secondly, this intended improvement facilitates the end-goal of confidently finding correlations between increases in attention for given topics in the Council and the subsequent WPs. For example, an increase in attention for environmental issues after an election in the College could be due to a mandate effect but in the EU context also due to the delegated process (e.g. Baumgartner et al., 2012) where the Council coerces openness to change.

8.1.2. *H1 and H2* - The frequency distribution of change in attention

Breeman et al. build their longitudinal analysis of the level of change in the executive policy agenda on testing the distribution of the degrees of change, in percentages, which they distinguish as an “often observed feature of temporal analyses of policy agendas” (2009, p. 11).

Lundgren et al. (2018) use a similar approach for their comparative longitudinal analysis. Specifically, the test is whether the resulting distribution has a (lepto)kurtic distribution. For this analysis both the frequency distribution per policy topic over the full period and the overall frequency distribution per WP and per “Commission” are of interest. Processes governed by punctuated equilibrium show kurtic or leptokurtic frequency distributions – “lepto” meaning thin. That is, limited change most of the time but also instances of episodic large change. A normal, mesokurtic or platykurtic distribution would fit a process that is open to change because the number of observations of little or no change would be relatively lower. A responsive decision-making body that is not under severe crisis conditions would react incrementally (i.e. Downs, 1972).

Pertaining to the hypothesis, which stipulates a test for the mandate effect in the WPs, the different stages – the first, second, third, fourth and final WPs – of the “Commissions” are pooled together to create an average. These are subsequently compared to the overall frequency distribution of the pooled policy topics in the period 2000 – 2020. The second application of this method is for the pooled policy issue observations for the WPs per “Commission” term (e.g. Prodi). The purpose of these comparisons is to uncover any 1.) irregular or cyclical openness to change by Commissions and 2.) a longitudinal trend in openness to change.

The kurtosis values are measured using the SciPy open-source library’s Kurtosis function which calculates by default Fisher’s definition with a normal of 0.0 (Zwillinger & Kokoska, 2000). The colloquial description of what the kurtosis value calculates is the “fatness” of the “tails” in the frequency distribution, where a fatter tail means a higher level of a few large changes and a large majority of little to no change. Patterns of slender peaks and extended, thicker tails suggest that the distributions are leptokurtic (Lundgren et al., 2018, p. 559). A leptokurtic value or pattern then can be observed as a high kurtosis value. Additionally, the frequency distributions are tested for skewness, where SciPy code tests to what extent the skew is different from the normal distribution (Agostino, Belanger & D’Agostino, 1990). For example, if the absolute observations per policy issue on the agenda is characterised by an overall decrease in agenda contraction, the skewness will be strongly left-censored. The second application of this method is for the pooled policy issue observations for the WPs per “Commission”. For example, the WPs for the “Juncker” Commission (01-11-2015 - 30-11-2019) this pools the observations for the WPs for 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019.

8.1.3. The percentage-percentage method

Two approaches to calculate the level of change between one unit of observation and the subsequent will be used complementarily to test for robustness. However, similarly to Lundgren et al. (2018), the results reported are a product of the commonly used percentage-percentage method (cf. Baumgartner et al. 2009), via the formula:

$$\frac{\text{percentage of agenda at time 2} - \text{percentage of agenda at time 1}}{\text{percentage of agenda at time 1}}$$

The alternative approach is the percentage-count method where the formula works the same but instead of the percentages, i.e. the fraction of the agenda, the counts, i.e. the absolute counts, are used as input. Jones and Baumgartner (2005, pp. 201-202) includes a detailed discussion of these two methods. In brief, the former method, reported on in the analysis, gives insight into the relative attention given to all policy areas regardless any agenda expansions or contractions over time. The latter method gives insight into the development of the absolute amount of attention for policy areas. Therefore, the main reason for opting for the percentage-percentage (pp) method is the potential changing nature of the WPs and Council Conclusions. Indeed, not necessarily the changing nature of the institutions themselves, which is the subject of a more multifaceted and controlled test in this research design. For example, the WPs have undergone aesthetic and functional developments where absolute counts could unintentionally report on stylistic changes rather than openness to change.

8.1.4. The longitudinal model for leptokurtosis

While the previous method using the kurtosis function provides a clearer picture of the differences between WPs, to tell the full story a more longitudinal approach is still missing. Therefore, the rolling average over a three WP pool will provide the leptokurtosis calculation with added accuracy over a longer timeframe. Up to a certain point, an increase of datapoints increases the accuracy of the calculation, which provides the longitudinal model with more overall accuracy, while accuracy between WPs is less relevant. To this end, two approaches are applied. The retrospective rolling average is calculated according to the method below. In this representation, the parentheses indicate the measured instance of the WPs. It should be noted that this results in a bias towards the foregoing openness to change, but that any prospective rolling average would internalise events that could not have possibly influenced the openness to change.

Retrospective rolling average: $krt-ra_{n3} = Kurtosis(WP_{n1} + WP_{n2} + (WP_{n3}))$

8.1.5. The correlation agenda on agenda

In their account of the Dutch executive through annual addresses Breeman et al. (2009) generate correlation coefficients for the number of statements coded under each of the succeeding pairs of years, which they argue is a “more exact measure of the change patterns, showing the overall ups and downs in policy attention graphically” (p. 17). The result then means that the closer the coefficient is to 1, the smaller the change with the previous WP, and a 1 would mean that it is in fact equal. Therefore, Python’s SciPy library provides a Spearmanr function that calculates a Spearman correlation coefficient with associated p-value. The Spearman “rank-order” correlation coefficient is a nonparametric measure of the monotonicity of the relationship between two datasets. The result varies between -1 and 1, where a result of 1 or -1 would indicate an exact monotonic relationship. The documentation continues that the p-value roughly indicates the probability of an uncorrelated system producing datasets that have a Spearman correlation at least as extreme as the one computed from these datasets. Important to note is that the p-values are not entirely reliable for datasets under $N=500$ (Zwillinger & Kokoska, 2000).

8.1.6. Controls

Where the correlation between WPs and the level of kurtosis of WPs and the Commissions tell something about the cross-section of the WPs, the concentration of issues provides a first indication of a possible reason for the “contest for attention” showing differentiated results. To reiterate, the level of attention would be “Downsian”, showing gradual ups-and-downs, if levels of institutional friction and external factors would not interfere. Therefore, should frequency distribution and correlation results point out that, say, first or second WPs appear more open to change, external factors such as crises could still explain these effects. Breeman et al. (2009) report annual values of a Herfindahl index of policy attention. Herfindahl-Hirschman indices are calculated by summing the squared proportions of an item, in this case the proportions of statements in each WP addressing one of 21 major policy topics. Therefore, a value of 1.0 would indicate that attention was given to only one of the 21 policy topics and a value near zero would indicate an even distribution of attention across the issues. Below is the mathematical representation of this index calculation where M is the number of mentions observed per policy topic for that WP.

THE POLITICAL COLLEGE: INCREASED FRICTION OR OPEN TO CHANGE?

$$HHI = M_1^2 + M_2^2 + M_3^2 + M_4^2 \dots + M_n^2$$

Similarly, the levels of concentration using the Herfindahl index are calculated for the political composition of the College. In this attempt to quantify the political preference heterogeneity of the College, the independent Commissioners are grouped as a virtual political group. Still, the level of independents can give indication as to the preference heterogeneity and shall thus be reported. In this case the M would be replaced by the P for political party per Commission.

9. RESULTS & ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the results of the data analysis with the aim to uncover when and to what extent the College is open to change. It is structured to home in from a description of the findings to a granular analysis of the relationship between the variables identified in the research design. Firstly, the overall patterns of change in the timeseries are presented.

9.1. What effects can be seen from the new intervals?

Firstly, the Council remains more irregular in attention distribution, perhaps with exaggerated effects due to the visual increase in dramatic shifts compared to Nakshbande (2020, p.57). Secondly, the additionally coded 2020 WP and 2019 Council Conclusions appear to be at most marginally affected by systemic divergence with previously coded data because of the relatively good fit with the overall observations.³⁵ Furthermore, this should also give initial confidence in the reformatted datasets where no stark outliers become visible in the visual representations. The two graphs below provide a visual representation of the measured datapoints for the WPs (N=441) in Figure 2 and the Council Conclusions (N=441) in Figure 3 for the overall period, measured over the WP publications intervals. These give first indications of the result of the dependent variable-focused approach. They show a considerably more irregular Council, indicating either responsiveness or friction, leading to a punctuated agenda. Instead, the College shows a relatively more incremental pattern, in line with the expectations from the theory and Nakshbande's findings; in these results too, "the Council, more so than the Commission, appears to 'delay action to process issues and overrespond when they finally react'" (2020, p. 57; cf. Elias, 2019, p. 76; Alexandrova, 2014). Another partial explanation could still come from a higher degree of responsiveness from the Council coupled with multiple major external events, such as crises, in the observed period. Below in Table 5 is an overview of the different topic areas and the WPs to help guide the reader through the tables and the graphs.

³⁵ The increase in attention for the Environment code corresponds to the publication of the "Green Deal", a landmark strategy by the Commission presented in the first WP of the College.

Table 5

The Capic codes used to reference topic areas and WPs³⁶

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| ■ Macroeconomics | ■ Energy | ■ Defence |
| ■ Civil Rights, Minority Issues and Civil Liberties | ■ Immigration | ■ Space, Science, Technology and Communications |
| ■ Health | ■ Transportation | ■ Foreign Trade |
| ■ Agriculture and Fisheries | ■ Law and Crime | ■ International Affairs and Foreign Aid |
| ■ Labour and Employment | ■ Social Policy | ■ EU Governance and Government Operations |
| ■ Education | ■ Regional and Urban Policy and Planning | ■ Culture and Media |
| ■ Environment | ■ Banking, Finance and Internal Trade | |

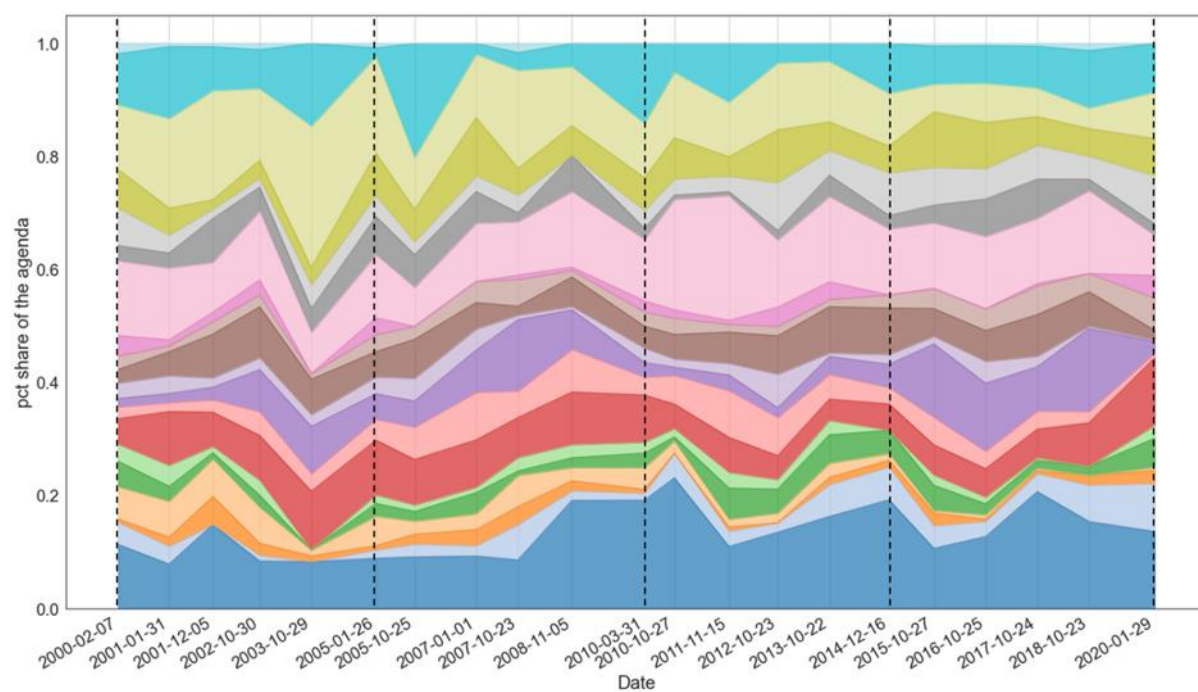


Figure 2 Composition of the WPs over time

³⁶ Policy area no. 21 “Public Lands, Water Management and Territorial Issues” has been omitted due to excessive zeros in the dataset.

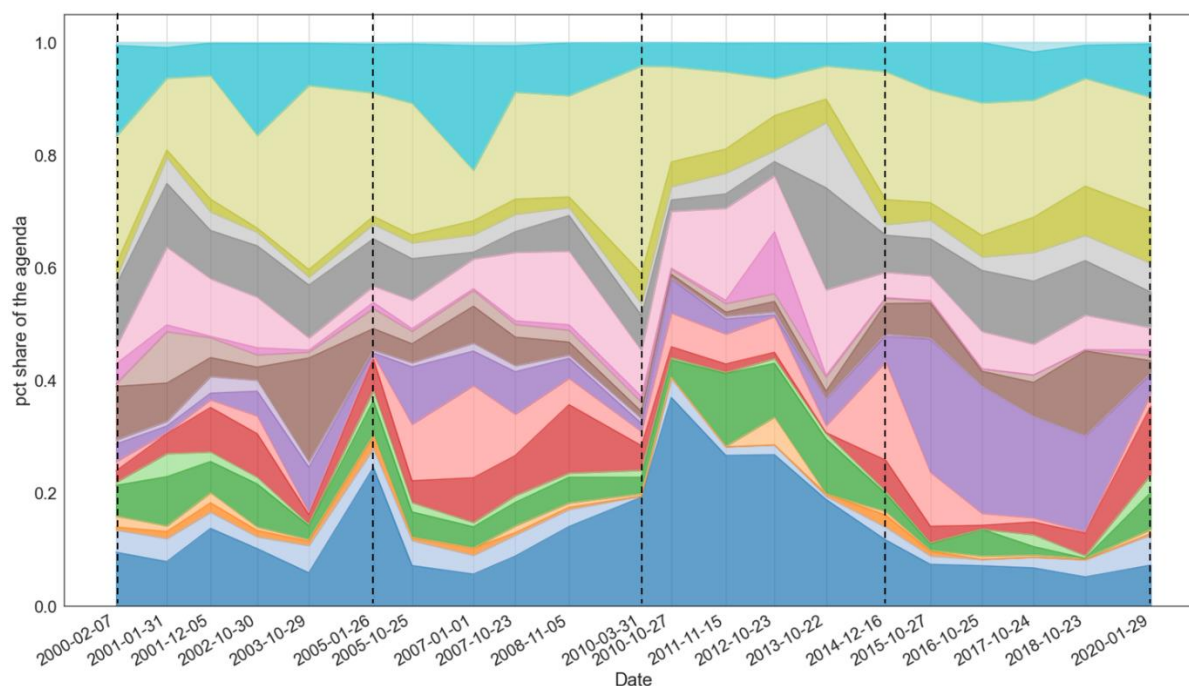


Figure 3 Composition of the Council Conclusions over time

9.2. Initial descriptive observations

Similar to Nakshbande (2020, p. 56), each figure demonstrates the proportion of the agenda taken up by the individual policy areas for each unit of observation. The total length of the Y-axis represents 100 percent (1) of the agenda. It should be noted here that the slope of the line can be misleading due to the cumulative nature of the area chart, yet the existence of sharp angles does indicate punctuation. The irregularity in the timeseries over the X-axes alludes to the fundamentally different approach where the surface area between the intervals of observations equal to the average attention observed for a given policy issue in the period between the WP publications. Furthermore, the black dashed vertical lines signify elections to the Parliament and the College. They are punctuated between WPs and give a first indication as to their possible effects on the attention distribution to topic areas in the College.³⁷

In Figure 2 and 3, the period between 1999-2020 shows a College that is, relative to the Council, more stable in its distribution of attention for topic areas, with fewer instances of higher-than-average changes. On the one hand, this could mean that the College has a

³⁷ It should be noted, too, that the Council appears to be affected by the same institutional cycles, which would lead to altogether new hypotheses of an institutional cycle for the Council where the election of a new President affects the attention distribution.

secretarial role to the Council and thus maintains a relatively set list of priorities to work on, focussing marginally more on topics that are delegated to the Commission by the Council. In this perception, the Commission does not behave as a “normal” executive. Elias (2019) summarises this as “the Commission is busier working in consequence than trying to set the pace” (2019, p. 148), because the EU Treaties preclude the European Council from performing legislative functions, implying this institution can permit to operate solely on the basis of “[providing] general guidelines” (Elias, 2019, p. 148; cf. Nakshbande, 2020, p. 77). In other words: “the Commission is busier working in consequence than trying to set the pace” (Elias, 2019, p. 148). On the other hand, an increase in inertia could be evidence of increased friction. Gleaning from these figures, neither the Council nor the elections show an obvious effect on attention in the College. However, because a complete absence of any, or static, relationship is unlikely, according to the theory and earlier findings (i.e. Nakshbande 2020; Elias, 2019), further methodical analysis of the results is justified.

9.2.1. The College is less irregular than the Council

The College has historically been less exposed to public salience and media debate (Kassim, 2020), which could explain the higher levels of stability. When decision-makers are less exposed to public opinion or less dependent on an electoral mandate, the responsiveness can be expected to be reduced. The smaller the “exposure” between the public and the decision-making body, the lower the expected sensitivity to public salience (cf. Erbring, 1980; Neuman, 1990). If the exposure between the public and the decision-making body is higher, legislative priorities are likely to reflect anticipated “policy window[s]” of opportunity in areas that the public perceives as politically salient (Kingdon, 1984, p. 20; Kreppel & Oztas, 2017, p. 1120, cf. Nakshbande, 2020, p. 47).

9.3. Is there evidence for institutional cycles in attention distributions?

The following reports on the descriptive statistics for the WPs using frequency distributions drawing from Lundgren et al. (2018), Breeman et al. (2009) and Baumgartner et al. (2012). By doing so, the level of change per policy area between WPs can uncover any differences between maturity levels of Commissions and any divergences over time. To come to the figure for change per policy area, the reported distribution calculations are based on the percentage-percentage method, meaning that that the percentual change of the fraction per policy area has

been pooled into a frequency distribution. The first observation in Figure 4 alludes to the existence of institutional patterns. The divergence between openness to change in the College can be observed in a visual representation of the frequency distributions per WP. The figure, like the other frequency distributions plots in this segment are composed of overlaying kernel density estimation plots, analogous to a histogram but linear, where the “density” refers to the relative fraction of the total observations.

Finally, the lighter the hue the later the date of the WP publication. Different WPs show markedly different levels of openness to change. The second observation in Figure 5 confirms the expectation from Alexandrova (2014), Elias (2019, p. 76), Nakshbande (2020, p. 57) and Baumgartner et al. (2012) that indeed the Commission’s policy agenda is not shaped through a consistent and incremental process. The average shape, the aggregate of the frequency distributions, is leptokurtic, with very narrow peaks and fat tails. Moreover, and this observation is key for answering *H1* and *H2*, the frequency distributions appear to 1.) fluctuate between normal and leptokurtic distributions, and 2.) show variations throughout the observed period. Still, this cumulative representation hides much of the granularity that is needed to uncover the longitudinal and cyclical/ irregular openness to change. In Figure 4, the normality test results are summarised for the pooled distributions of the full period, showing a rejection of the Shapiro-Wilks test, confirming non-normality, and a very high kurtosis and skewness value.

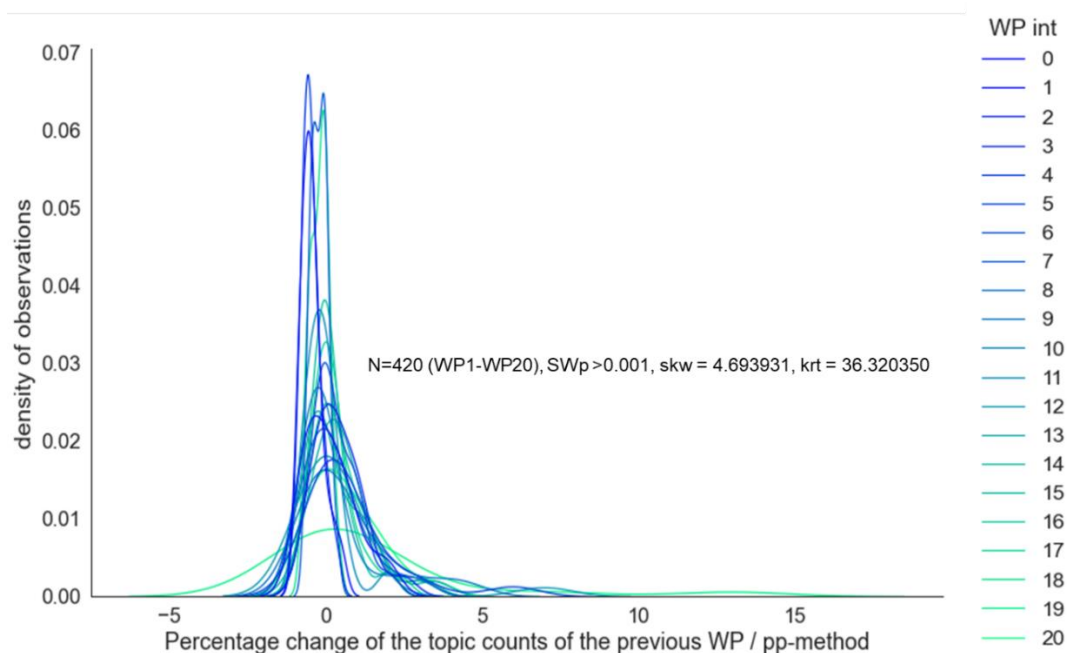


Figure 4 The frequency distribution of percentual change per topic area per WP

9.4. Is the College open to changes from the Council?

To test H_0 , the Council Conclusions to the subsequent WP interval periods, not to the calendar year in which the WP is published. In this sense, the results are likely to vary, if only slightly, from Nakshbande's (2020) calendar year approach.

9.4.1. Null hypothesis reconfirmed with stronger results

The results reported in Table 6, and in Figure 5 visually, indicate that the correlations for Health, Immigration, Regional and Urban Policy and Planning are of similar statistical significance and similar intensity. However, additionally, Environment, Energy, and Banking, Finance and Internal Trade, but also traditionally non-EU competencies Labour and Employment and Defence are correlated with a statistically significant result to varying degrees in this WP interval-based model, too. Additionally, the correlation coefficient (ρ) tends to be higher, all with >0.5 values. That means that roughly speaking, for these topic areas a 10% increase in the share of attention in Council Conclusions concurred with at least a 5% increase in the share of attention in the subsequent WP. Eight out of twenty intertemporal, interinstitutional topics counted are reported with a statistically significant correlation.

The theoretical and functional expectation that the Council predicts to a large extent the policy priorities for the WPs for the Commission is generally not very controversial. For a closer look at the level of convergence between the Council and the WPs, and how this relates to the institutional cycle in the College and Parliament, Figure 4 presents a cross-section of the correlations that appear statistically significant. At first glance, the Council appears to set the agenda for Immigration and Banking, Finance and Internal Trade, when interpreting an increase in the dashed line preceding an increase in the solid line. This would be in line with Nakshbande's (2020) findings that incorporate a more sophisticated inferential model considering several additional variables such as GDP growth, an approximation for public salience and support for the EU.

Table 6

The Spearman R intertemporal correlation coefficients between WPs and the Council Conclusions published in the period between the subject WP and the previous, 1999-2020.

| Topic area | rho | P-value |
|---|-----------|-------------|
| Macroeconomics | 0.275188 | 0.240283 |
| Civil Rights, Minority Issues and Civil Liberties | 0.121098 | 0.611050 |
| Health | 0.511571 | 0.021134* |
| Agriculture and Fisheries | 0.191337 | 0.419035 |
| Labour and Employment | 0.508271 | 0.022125* |
| Education | 0.210844 | 0.372233 |
| Environment | 0.581955 | 0.007104** |
| Energy | 0.615038 | 0.003900** |
| Immigration | 0.766917 | 0.000080*** |
| Transportation | 0.304908 | 0.191152 |
| Law and Crime | 0.048138 | 0.840280 |
| Social Policy | -0.335338 | 0.148357 |
| Regional and Urban Policy and Planning | 0.629357 | 0.002947** |
| Banking, Finance and Internal Trade | 0.600000 | 0.005163** |
| Defence | 0.535338 | 0.014997* |
| Space, Science, Technology and Communications | 0.165414 | 0.485838 |
| Foreign Trade | 0.279699 | 0.232348 |
| International Affairs and Foreign Aid | -0.177444 | 0.454203 |
| EU Governance and Government Operations | -0.224060 | 0.342286 |
| Culture and Media | 0.434544 | 0.055545 |

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Policy area no. 21 “Public Lands, Water Management and Territorial Issues” has been omitted due to excessive zeros in the dataset.

THE POLITICAL COLLEGE: INCREASED FRICTION OR OPEN TO CHANGE?

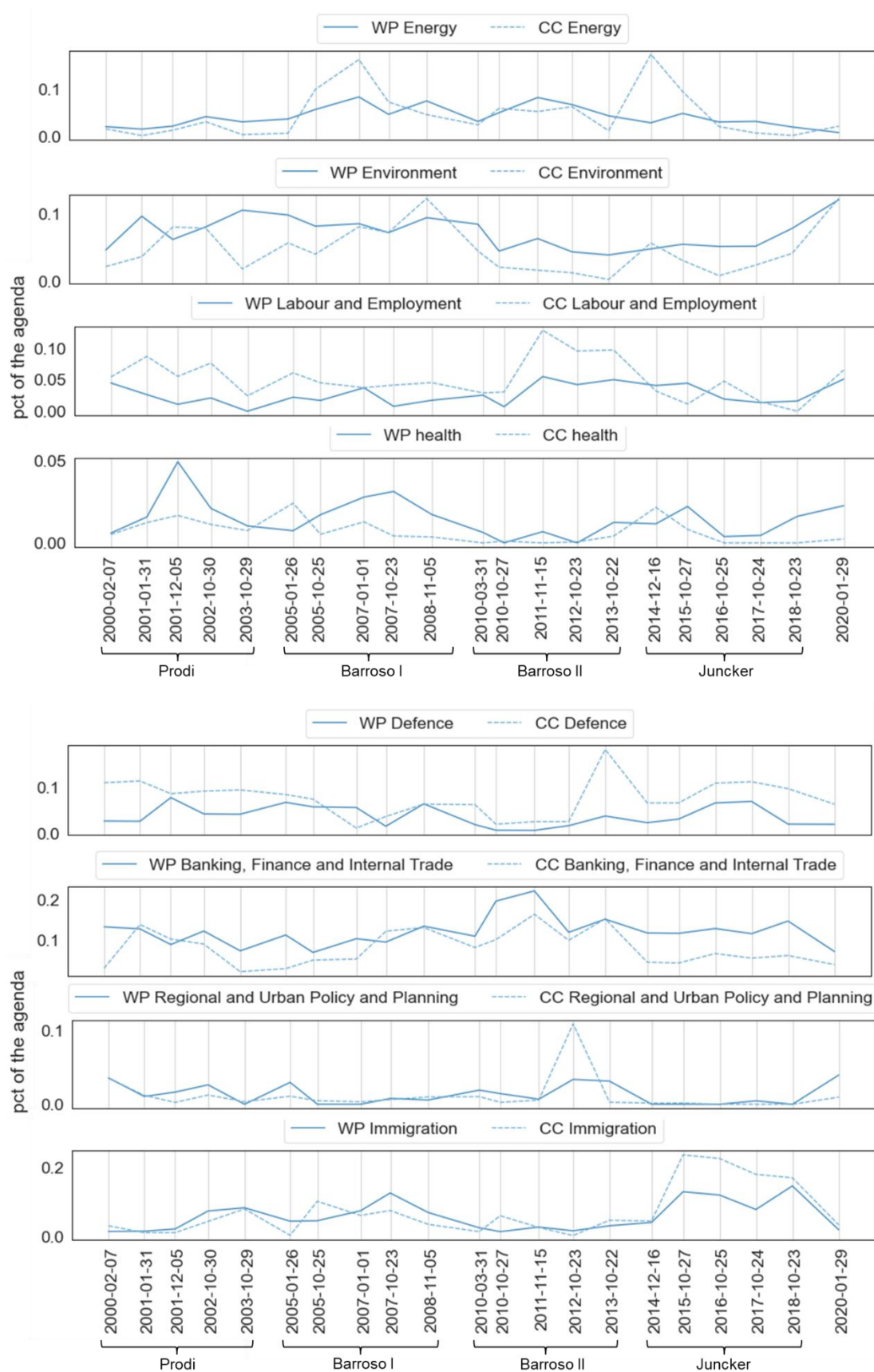


Figure 5 Synchronous percentage share of attention for significantly correlated topic areas between the WPs and the preceding Council Conclusions, 2000-2020.

9.4.2. Inconsistency with the expectation of proclivity

Whereas Nakshbande (2020, p. 78) and Alexandrova (2017, p. 769-770) find that proclivity – when divergence between two co-legislators occurs due to a disposition of either institution to consistently focus on certain policy areas – can explain the divergences between the Commission and the Council, this does not translate neatly to the observations of correlations between topics with 1.) low consistency on the agendas over time and 2.) both shared and exclusive competencies.

Alexandrova finds that the Council’s preoccupation with intergovernmental policy areas governed by soft law and the Commission predisposition toward Community policy areas (Alexandrova, 2017, 769–770; cf. Puetter, 2013, p. 16), yet in these results the Commission and the Council appear to be occupied relatively equally for eight out of twenty topic areas. These findings also give rise to new questions pertaining to core tenets of the PET. Baumgartner and Jones (2002, p. 4) summarise that “institutions are fundamentally endogenous to the policy process”. Each institutional “venue” exerts a bias, in terms of dominant policy outlook and in the set of actors that are empowered or legitimised to take the decisions (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991, p. 1047). In the EU, issues can land in different courts because of the issue authority demarcated in the Treaties; some policy areas are national competencies, such as health, education, foreign affairs, defense, and some are European competencies, such as internal market, banking.

One explanation could be that in the EU, the location of issue authority is diffuse, differs per policy issue, and is subject to change over time. This all leads to a complex and dynamic system of issue authority with resulting challenges for making inferences regarding the formal or informal location of responsibility for policy attention and response. The concept of definition and redefinition matters for an analysis of the EU, also on macro-level, because over time policy authority can change venues, from for instance the Council to the Commission. This is due to formal and informal processes. Whereas the former would be more easily discernible in policy and legal analysis, PET can uncover informal processes where more attention is given to a certain issue leading up to a shift in competency or hidden shifts in attention and responsiveness.³⁸

³⁸ Princen (2013, p. 865) aptly exemplifies this with the corporate merger frame of choice. When successfully framed as a competition issue, policy should be made by the Commission under internal market competency, while framed as an international security issue, policy should be formed in the Council, under foreign affairs and defence competency.

9.5. Do institutional cycles increasingly affect the College's agenda?

Confirmation or rejection of *H1* and *H2* can coexist with confirmation of *H0*, but would merely reduce the likelihood for a causal relationship to be confirmed. Confounding effects can be hidden in longitudinal and cyclical institutional developments. While the concept of presidentialisation is essentially about leadership reform, the concept of parliamentarisation concerns primarily accountability. Both can be expected to have affected the longitudinal and the cyclical patterns of prioritisation processes in the College. On the one hand, the political executive becomes more responsive to the political signals from its Parliament by which it is to some, formally increasing, extent controlled, while on the other hand internal governance reforms can have an effect on the level of institutional friction (Kassim, 2020, p. 14), where the increasingly centralised steering of the College can be expected to show convergence between the intention of the President and the distribution of attention to topic areas in his or her mandate. At the same time, the introduction of political affiliations results in additional sources for explicit preference heterogeneity and potentially institutional friction.

9.5.1. *H1* rejected, *H2* confirmed: the College appears increasingly sticky

Testing the *H1* and *H2* hypotheses on the frequency distributions of the change per policy topic give two overarching results. Over time, the parliamentary elections are not increasingly followed by a higher-than-average aggregate change in attention on the Commission agenda in the first possible instance of policy prioritisation after an election. However, over time, a higher maturity of the Commission mandate is increasingly associated with a higher-than-average aggregate change in attention on the Commission agenda. This segment will go in deeper on the evidence, the limitations, and the implications of the nuances.

On average, the College's incubation time of change is sticky

The level of maturity of an incumbent College is associated with higher openness to change. The argument that the College is sticky is captured here in Polsby's (1984) concept of the incubation time of change. "[T]he organisational structure of government can be seen as a set of powerful intermediary factors" (Daviter, 2009, p. 1131). Figure 2, showing relative incrementality in the College, and the apparent role maturity in conditioning openness to change, is in line with Laver and Budge's (1992) argument that the benefits of changing the

status-quo are reduced in systems that tend to have an incremental course of attention change in the policy agenda.

In the tested dataset, the incubation time of change is relatively high because the final WPs – the highest maturity level – consistently show frequency distributions with closer-to-normal shapes. The maturity level of the Commissions is a working definition for elaborating on the frequency distribution results of the pooled figures of percentual change per topic area for the time previous to the publication of the WPs, throughout the period 2000-2020. In brief, that means that the first WP of all the Commissions, Prodi, Barroso I etc., are pooled together, and the second WP of all the Commissions and so on. The levels of kurtosis range between 3.327196 for the second WPs and 26.471605 for the third WPs.

Moreover, an informative comparison can be made in comparison of the shape statistics. To that end, in Figure 6, the horizontal lines have been added to demarcate the extremity of the peaks, expressed in slenderness, for the maturity samples and the arrows demarcate observations in the higher ranges, expressed in fatness of the tails. Critically, these juxtaposed graphs indicate that yet further granularity is needed for a comprehensive understanding of the instances of openness to change and the evolution of the Commission over time. Figure 5 presents the distribution lines in overlaying kernel density estimation plots for the maturity samples referenced in the legend. It shows how the longitudinal agenda is leptokurtic, but the extent to which the agenda shows low levels of change with few exceptions is divergent between different periods and or stages of the Commissions' mandates.

Table 7 reports on the normality tests. Due to sample size interference in normality tests, it is instructive to interpret exclusively the maturity samples comparatively, all of which have identical sample sizes (four WPs), eliminating sample size variance interference. To provide a better common point of comparison, the average kurtosis value for the maturity levels is ($krt\ mean = 12.1198358$) and the skewness is ($skw\ mean = 2.8118906$). From these tests the following becomes clear. Firstly, the first, second and fourth WPs have a lower-than-average level of kurtosis and skewness, and the third and fourth show an above average level of kurtosis and skewness. Secondly, it should be noted that for all the samples, the Shapiro-Wilks test (SW_p) is reported and confirms the hypothesis comfortably that the distribution for the population is not shaped as a normal distribution, i.e. incrementality. While the lower peaks in 1 and 5 signify a relatively lower amount of close-to-zero or zero change, the higher kurtosis value reported in Table 7 would prompt expectations for fatter tails and more slender peaks in those frequency distributions. One explanation could be that the relatively low N of observations creates sensitivity for outliers, marked with arrows, and that in fact the overall

THE POLITICAL COLLEGE: INCREASED FRICTION OR OPEN TO CHANGE?

openness to change in the maturity levels 1 and 5 is relatively higher. A cursory observation could be noted that the distance between the peak, marked with horizontal lines, and the extremities of the tails appears relatively larger in 3 and 5 corresponding to the two highest kurtosis and skewness values reported. However, this is by and of itself not convincing evidence. Since this set of results deals with relatively low numbers of observations, the graphical representation may be considered more informative.

Table 7

The normality test results for the frequency distributions of percentual change per topic area per maturity level, 2000-2020

| | Mean | First WPs N=80 | Second WPs N=80 | Third WPs N=80 | Fourth WPs N=80 | Fifth WPs N=80 |
|-----------------|------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| SW _p | | <0.001 | <0.001 | <0.001 | <0.001 | <0.001 |
| skw | 2.8118906 | 2.331116 | 1.633488 | 4.444631 | 1.543036 | 4.107182 |
| krt | 12.1198358 | 7.224459 | 3.327196 | 26.471605 | 2.411984 | 21.163935 |

THE POLITICAL COLLEGE: INCREASED FRICTION OR OPEN TO CHANGE?

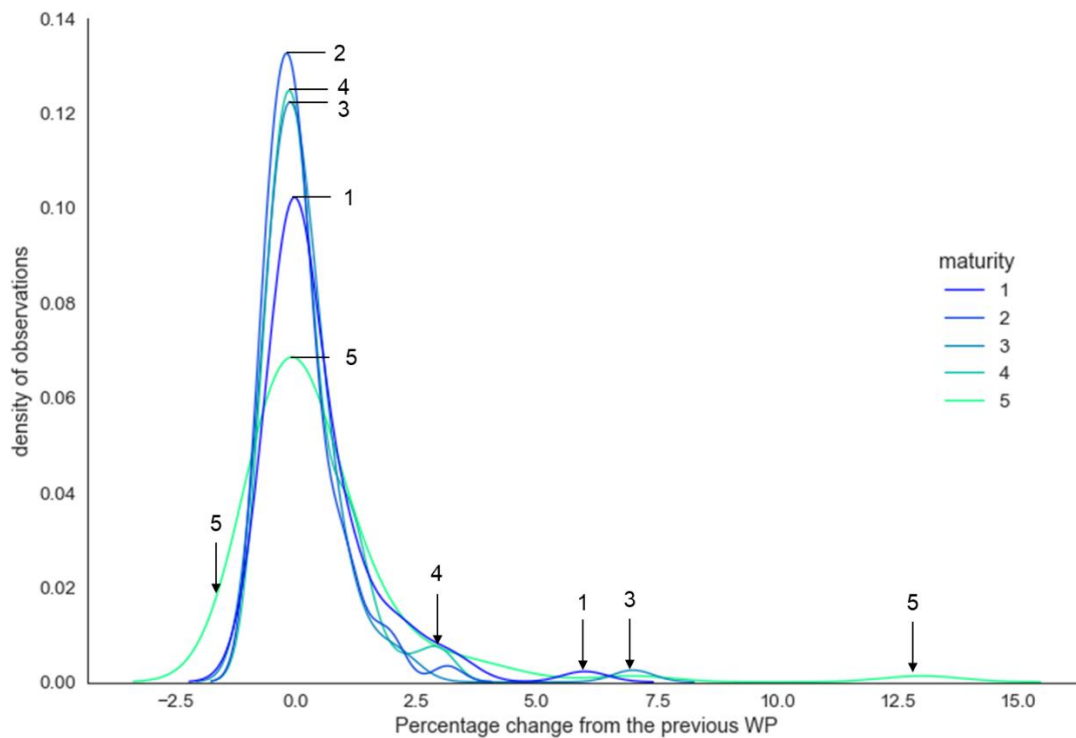


Figure 6 The pooled frequency distributions of percentage change per topic area for the WP per “maturity”, 2000-2020.

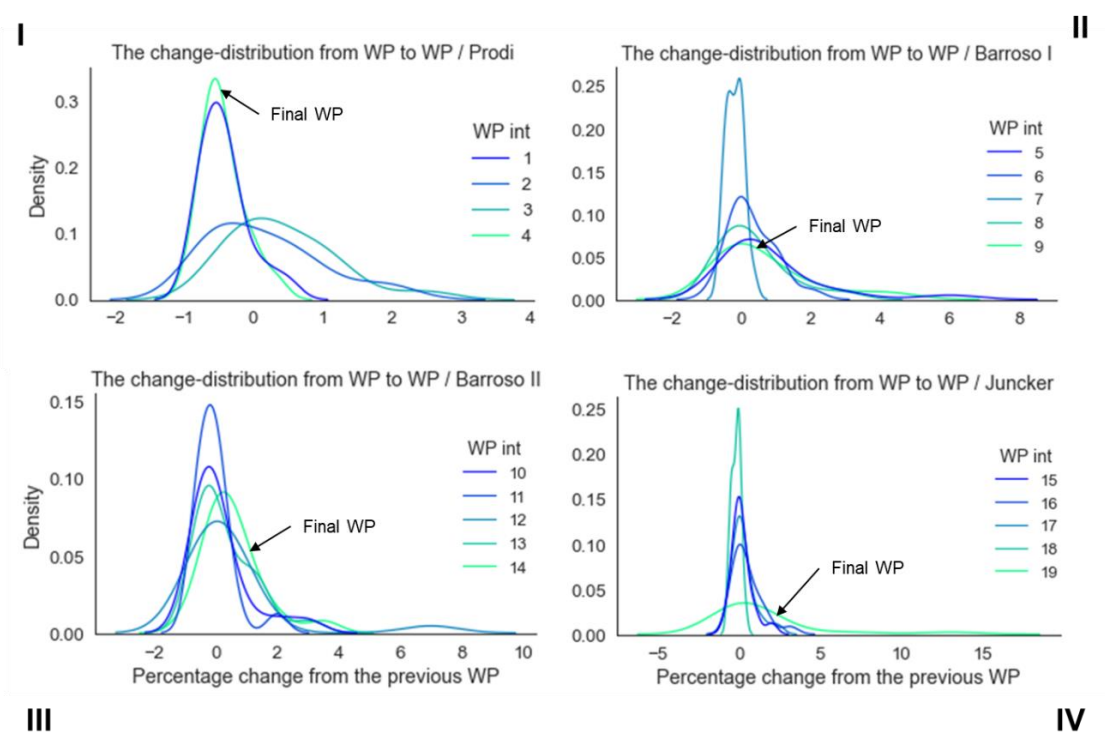


Figure 7 The frequency distributions of percentage change per topic area for WPs per Commission

Over time, the Commissions have become increasingly inert and sticky

Beyond the average openness to change of the final stages of the Commission mandate, the results per mandate show and incremental increase in this stickiness. In Figure 7, from quartile I to IV, chronologically, the peaks become on average narrower and the tails relatively fatter, the latter expressed in the highest range of change, on the X-axis, incrementally increasing from <4 to >8 to >9 to >17. This figure focusses on the results for the frequency distributions of percentual change per topic area for WPs per Commission mandate. Whereas the previous distributions pooled the percentual change figures for the maturity levels, here the WPs published under the mandate of specific Commissions, such as Prodi. The purpose of this approach is again to find cyclicity, irregularities and longitudinal developments. In this vein, a preliminary observation is that over time, by and large, it appears that the Commission has become less open to change, although with what appear to be cyclical patterns. The narrowing overall distribution alludes to an increasing level of close-to-zero values. Secondary is the observation that apart from the Prodi Commission, the final WP has the least, or second least, close-to-zero values. These observations are in line with the more normal distribution of the pooled final WPs in the previous cross-sectional test. Finally, the results show that there is substantial divergence between the level of change in the different WPs published both between Commissions over time and within Commission mandates.

Increasing stickiness could be inconsistent with presidentialisation.

While governance reforms in the College might have increased efficiency, there is reason to believe that increasing and increasingly convoluted accountability links external to the College have increased friction in responsiveness. At the same time, there is a possibility still that the College has become more efficient within an increasingly frictional policy system. On the one hand, the expectation would be that the President of the College more specifically and the College more generally had gained in ability to push for the changes that are demanded by a continuously evolving set of challenges in society. Kassim (2020, p. 14) argues that “[t]he emergence of a strong political and administrative centre within the Commission since 2004 has greatly improved internal coordination, which had historically been highly problematic for the organisation.” This was preceded by the “Kinnock reforms” implemented between 1999

and 2004 sought to modernise the Commission.³⁹ They included the creation of a central planning and programming apparatus. Moreover, Kassim notes that “by converting the Secretariat-General from its traditional function of serving the College as a body into a presidential service, Barroso [II, 2009-2014] was able to extend the reach of the presidency, and to use the Secretariat-General’s presence at key procedural interstices to ensure the promotion of his policy agenda” (Kassim, 2020, p. 13). And finally, the 2014 reforms, also called the “Juncker reforms”, initiated by Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker to reform the internal workings of the Commission. It introduced a system of Vice-Presidents, increasing direct interaction between the President and the responsible Commissioners.

On the other hand, Brooks and Bürgin (2020) allude to the ambiguous results of the process of presidentialisation, where the President has gained increasing power to steer away from “purposeful opportunism” and thus the “natural” and efficient development of the political priorities. Juncker’s inertia, expressed in narrow peaks, followed by a marked openness to change in the final WP could be explained by the urgency for the completion of the priorities as per the intention of the mandate and the “Juncker reforms”, accompanied by the title of the final agenda: “Delivering what we promised”. To reiterate, Juncker undertook a series of organisational and procedural reforms, introducing “new ways of working,” that were intended to ensure the effective delivery of the policy programme he set out before the Parliament in his Political Guidelines (Juncker, 2014). “The aim was to strengthen political leadership in an effort to overcome the fragmentation that had historically characterised the organisation and thereby ensure delivery of the Commission President’s 10 policy priorities within the lifetime of the Juncker administration” (Kassim, 2020).

9.5.2. Cyclicity found in openness to change

Judging from the results, the presupposed existence effects on the attention distribution from institutional cycles, i.e. electing the College and Parliament, appears to hold true, while effects from direct mandate effect from the parliamentary elections, are consistently absent. In figure 8, the retrospective rolling average kurtosis value for the WPs shows a cyclical pattern along an increasing trend, indicating the patterns that would align to the expectations for an increasing

³⁹ These reforms were implemented after the uncovering of large-scale corruption in the Commission, which occurred under the Santer Commission.

– delayed – mandate effect.⁴⁰ However, due to the high level of delay, this cannot constitute a mandate effect. Focussing on the three mandates that are fully covered in the timeseries, Barroso I, Barroso II and Juncker, the peaks tend to move closer to the end of the mandate. Keeping in mind that this is a retrospective running average, the peak kurtosis appears to lie consistently in the first half of the mandate at first, moving gradually to the middle of the mandate. In any case, the peaks appear to occur with a certain regularity synchronously with the mandates meaning that circumstances during the different levels of maturity could well have led to variations in openness to change. Above all, this model should be interpreted as a window to view the longitudinal pattern and trend and not the specificities of the different Commissions. The calculations for kurtosis and skewness become more reliable with the introduction of more, appropriate, datapoints. Therefore, for this approach the subject WP are pooled with the distributions from the previous two WPs (number of samples = 3, N = 60). Figure 8 shows a dotted line that connects the kurtosis values.⁴¹ The Skewness rolling average shows a relatively stable trendline without increase nor decrease. One skewness value to note is for 2007 (pooled (05,06,07)), which is markedly higher than average, possibly related to the preceding 2004 expansion of Member States.

⁴⁰ In analysing timeseries, cyclicity should not be confused with seasonality or trends (although here the cycles are accompanied with trend) because cycles are not fixed in length. However, the electoral cycles for the College and the Parliament are in fact (near) fixed in length. Therefore, based on this model, cyclicity could interfere with inference models (e.g. Nakshbande, 2020)

⁴¹ The figure shows the kurtosis and skewness values for the retrospective rolling average (instance pooled with the previous two instances) for the WP frequency distribution per topic area for 2000-2020.

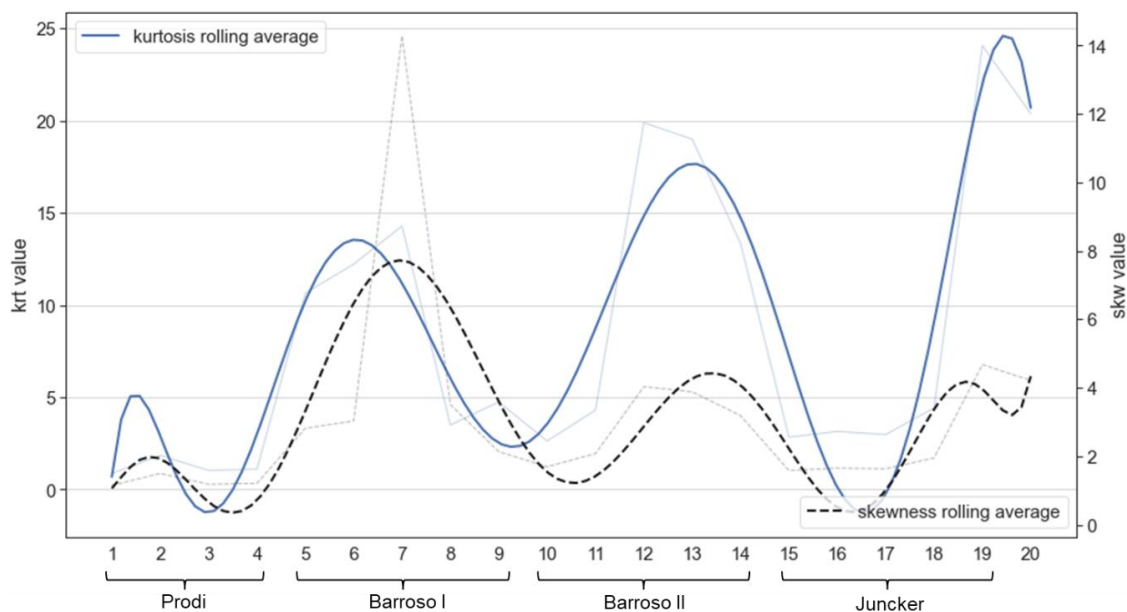


Figure 8 Kurtosis and skewness values for the rolling average WP

9.5.3. Over time, the Commissions' agendas become more inert and similar

The Colleges have produced, on average, WPs that have increasing high correlation coefficients with the previous WPs, seen in the trendline plotted in Figure 9. In contrast, the Council, although too becoming more consistent on average seen in the trendline plotted in Figure 9, has become less consistent expressed by the erratic development of the correlation coefficient. These observations align with the macro-patterns in Figure 2 and 3.

This longitudinal development is built by 1.) calculating the correlation of a WP with the previous, and 2.) by juxtaposing this to the Commission mandate sample kurtosis values (e.g. Barroso I). The kurtosis value ranges between 1.991629 for Prodi to 35.367345 for Juncker, with a growing increase in between with 7.651915 for Barroso I and 14.898494 for Barroso II. These numbers correspond to the shape statistics in Figure 7. The first result shows with some confidence that the successive Commissions have increasingly similar WPs and increasingly inert mandates. Figure 9 shows a solid polygonal line representing the Spearman's R correlation coefficient (ρ value) between the subject WP and the previous. The horizontal lines represent the kurtosis value for the pooled distribution in Commission mandates, where a higher hue intensity reflects a higher value. These upward moving lines, and thus the level of kurtosis, allude to a Commission that is increasingly inert and punctuated.

To reiterate, inertia does not equal insensitivity, but it does show that attention to policy areas is decreasingly incremental. Furthermore, the correlation coefficients show a mild heteroskedastic quality with increasing linearity roughly after 2013. Finally, crossing through

the rho values is the polynomial linear regression (3-degrees) to indicate the trend. Therefore, this result shows with some confidence and consistency that successive Commissions have increasingly similar WPs between 2000-2020. Finally, when focussing on the election years, in between the horizontal lines, no particular pattern can be observed; certainly not a consistent and substantial decrease in the rho value which would be the expectation for the existence of a mandate effect. However, in line with previous observation in the frequency distributions, the final years show a consistent decrease in the rho value, indicating a lower similarity, and thus openness to change.

9.6. Heterogeneity peaked in 2004, political homogeneity in 2010-14

The College is up to 2015 decreasingly heterogenous, peaking in Barroso II and decreasing subsequently. The effects could only have been marginal if any significant effects existed at all. In contrast, heterogeneity in nationalities had shifted much more significantly in 2004 with the expansion; a shift that corresponds to the attention shifts in the subsequent WPs (see also König, 2017). Under successive EPP Presidents, Barroso I and II and Juncker, the EPP had steadily grown in influence. Still, because the College operates under the “collegiality” principle, the increase in influence would have been in functional power and not in formal discretionary power. As for the independents, they diminish over time and remain marginal in the final two Commissions. In reality, the processes not visible in this figure, like presidentialisation, are likely to have had a profound effect on the decision-making processes for issue prioritisation (i.e. Kassim, 2020).

Table 8 presents an account of the level of political heterogeneity in the College. Egeberg, (2010, p. 129) notes that the Commissioners are neither completely independent nor a Member State agent. However, the author identifies the growing importance of supranational actors and a more regulated context as a potential source of an impediment for individual Commissioners from serving the interest of the “country they know best”. Assuming these findings hold true, it is more likely that changes in the preference heterogeneity in the College 1.) were determined by “the country they knew best” and thus stabilises over time after 2004⁴², and 2.) marginally when there is lower heterogeneity in the (nominal) political affiliations of

⁴² 2004 is the year of the “big bang” when 10 new Member States joined the EU with significantly divergent preferences due to largely distinct histories, economies, and levels of development.

the members of the College. Finally, the concept of preference heterogeneity redefined and tailored for the political College could be of more use to future researchers because it is only in the Von der Leyen Commission that a Commissioner with Eurosceptic affiliation, ECR member Janusz Wojciechowski from Poland, received a seat. Such developments could, potentially, unfold simultaneously with, or as a delayed response to, changing preferences at the national level.

Table 8

The political preference heterogeneity and kurtosis in the College 1999-2021. ⁴³

| Term | 99-04 | 04-10 | 10-14 | 15-19 | 20-21 (24) |
|---------------|----------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|
| President | Prodi | Barroso I | Barroso II | Juncker | v.d. Leyen |
| College total | 30 | 27 | 28 | 28 | 27 |
| MS total | 25 (15*) | 27 | 28 | 28 | 27 |
| HHI* | 0.167 | 0.222 | 0.333 | 0.222 | 0.167 |
| Kurtosis | 1.991629 | 7.651915 | 14.898494 | 35.367345 | - |

* *The Prodi Commission oversaw the 10 MS expansion in 2004*

**Herfindahl-Hirsh index*

9.6.1. When the College has been cyclical, the Council has been irregular

There is reason to believe that the institutional cycles in the College are an independent variable that has a place in the framework for analysis of attention cycles and dynamics in the EU policy system. While this independence does not negate completely the Council's influence on openness to change in the College, the institutional cycles, which in this analysis have found to affect openness to change, can be confidently defined as varying independently from developments in the Council.

The Council is, as is visible in Figure 3, relatively irregular in its priorities. In Figure 10, the Council Conclusions are aggregated at the interval between WP publications. Figure 9 and 10 can be compared because the same method has been applied to produce the results. To reiterate, the higher the rho value, the higher the correlation with the previous Council Conclusions. This shows a dissimilar result in the overall trend, and a greater irregularity.

⁴³ The number of Commissioners counted at the end of the mandate; before the Barroso I College, bigger MS took two seats while smaller MS took only one.

Therefore, the Council appears to be more responsive and macro-similarity, i.e. synchronous openness to change, does not become evident between the Council and the College. Especially when focussing only on the mandates that are fully covered in this model – Barroso I, II and Juncker – these findings hold true.

Although methodically problematic, a comparison between the kurtosis value for the overall pooled frequency distribution for both the College and the Council shows a twice-as-leptokurtic Council agenda. The Council could be the source of the cycles and trend found in the running average kurtosis values. However, the Council seems to be irregular when the College has been more regular (more linear), even cyclical, in its developments. Summing up, when comparing Figure 2 and 3 with Figure 9 and 10, whereas between certain topic areas there is a weak but statistically significant correlation between the WPs and the previous Council Conclusions, the aggregate levels of dissimilarity over time are visibly not correlated.

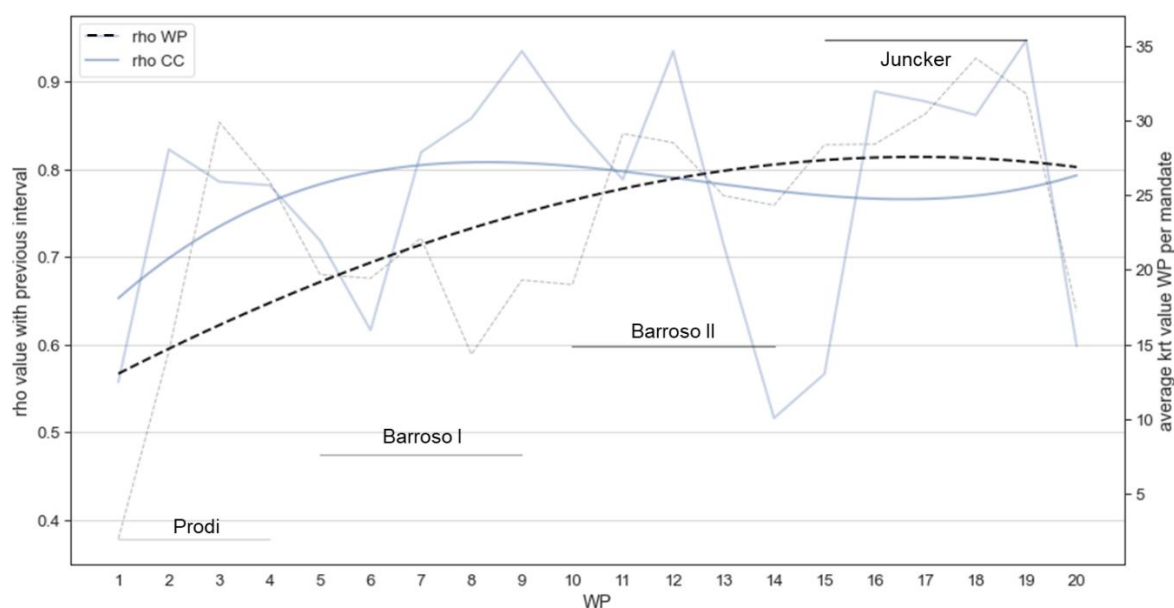


Figure 9 Interval-on-interval correlation coefficient and the kurtosis level per Commission mandate

9.7. What other factors can explain increasing and cyclical inertia?

According to Nakshbande (2020, p. 47), “WPs in their legislative priorities are likely to reflect anticipated “policy window[s]” of opportunity in areas that the public perceives as politically salient” (cf. Kingdon, 1984, p. 20; Kreppel & Oztas, 2017, p. 1120). Policy windows in the limited, yet increasing, set of topic areas that the Commission tends to focus on are, in a zero-

sum game, temporarily outcompete other topics. Therefore, (dramatic) increases in concentration could provide part of the explanation for increases in inertia where only a select number of topics take up much of the agenda, while other topics remain consistently less attended to. In this segment, the HHI index for concentration and an (innovative attempt at a) multi-variate cross-sectional approach provides answers.

9.7.1. High issue concentration is weakly associated with kurtosis

The level of issue concentration is positively, yet modestly, associated with the level of kurtosis which would indicate an increase in inertia when the concentration increases. This corresponds with the above results and the expectation from the PET, but it also shows that it is not necessarily likely that the cycles in inertia are significantly – or to a larger extent than through institutional cycles – caused by concentrations of attention. In Figure 11, the level of concentration in the WPs is expressed in the HHI value, building on the implications of the “limited attention span of policymakers” (cf. Baumgartner & Jones, 2009, p. 250).

When certain issues demand more attention, other issues are marginalised, so when the concentration increases, and the size of the agenda remains the same, other issues receive less attention in a zero-sum game. This method should give a complementary perspective for a more complete picture of the possible causes for attention shifts in the College. Whereas the kurtosis value is less reliable for small sample sizes, the HHI index can provide accurate insights pertaining to the entropy of the WPs over time. A high HHI value indicates a concentrated attention distribution, a low HHI value indicates a more even spread of attention over the different topic areas. This index captures accurately each incidence and, by nature, takes account of outliers.

In Figure 11 these values have been juxtaposed to provide further clarity, and in Annex II the values can be inspected.⁴⁴ The dashed line represents kurtosis and the solid line the HHI. Additionally, a Spearman R correlation test is reported on for these two variables, indicating a result with statistical significance to the first order (<0.05). This means that the concentration levels in this period are likely correlated (although weakly) to the level of kurtosis.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ The figure shows the kurtosis value for the retrospective rolling average (instance pooled with the previous two instances) for the WP frequency distribution per topic area and the level of concentration (HHI value), 2000-2020.

⁴⁵ As a robustness check, the same calculations have been performed after first order differencing, resulting in a non-significant, weaker correlation: Spearman R (correlation=0.346680, pvalue=0.145918)

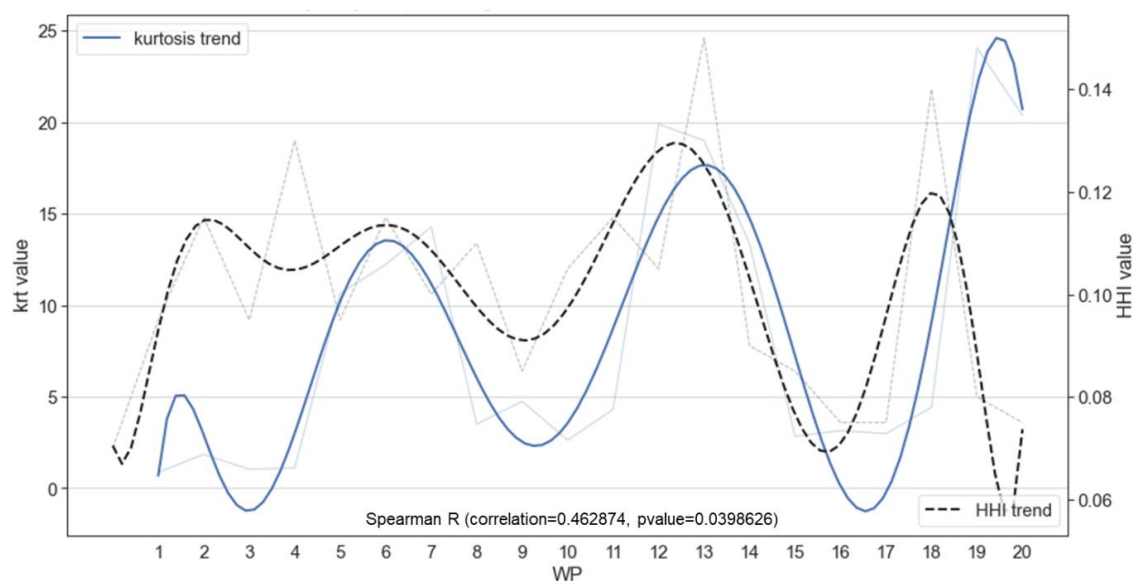


Figure 10 Rolling average kurtosis and the level of concentration

9.7.2. Regular and irregular attention dynamics coexist

The *irregularity* of the HHI values and the *regularity* of the kurtosis values indicate that there could be truth to the external-internal distinction, where the external influence on attention is driven by irregular societal events that influence political salience and strategic actors that purposefully influence the agenda (Kreppel & Oztas, 2017, p. 1120; Princen, 2013, p. 855, cf. Schattschneider, 1960, p. 4; Mair, 1997, p. 949)⁴⁶ and the internal factors influencing attention are driven by mostly regular institutional cycles. When the College's attention is subject to concentration, focussing more attention on fewer issues, the distribution is relatively inert, with few outliers – a punctuated equilibrium. However, beyond this correlation, the HHI appears not to be cyclical or regular and shows a moderate downward trend.

Still, due to the apparent heteroskedasticity of the observations this cannot point out if recent Commissions gave more even-handed attention to a wider array of issues. To that end, the juxtaposed values have been complemented with polynomial linear regressions (3-degree) for best fit. These trends show how, hypothetically, the kurtosis values could be extrapolated as a cyclical upward trend, and that while the concentration appears to peak in Barroso I's term, this is actually increasingly irregular.

⁴⁶ An alternative and complementary application of these concept can be found in “[issue] (de)politicisation.” Van der Veer and Haverland (2019, p. 1406) explain how processes of “[issue] (de)politicisation” are part and parcel of the EU.

9.7.3. Outliers of increases per topic area are not reflected interinstitutionally

Whereas the intertemporal Spearman R correlation coefficient between topic areas on the WPs have a statistically significant correlation with eight out of twenty counted topic areas, this is not necessarily proof for an association between concentration on the Council agenda and the WP of the next period. Such levels could be measured more comprehensively as not only the growth of that issue as relative part of the agenda (i.e. the pp method), but also the size of that issue in relative and absolute size on the agenda. Additionally, a cross-sectional approach exposes any patterns or outliers that would remain hidden when focussing only on correlations. Such a cross section of the issue per WP interval is visualised in Figure 11 for the WPs and in Figure 12 for the Council Conclusions. To use perhaps the most appropriate and obvious metaphor, when topics “balloon” in these figures – they move up in growth rate along the Y-axis and increase in absolute size, expressed in circumference, meaning the size of the marker – the given topic area respectively receives focus and expands. In brief, when they balloon, this reflects concentration, assuming zero-sum games.

Focussing events appear not to play a significant role in the explanation for the cyclical pattern in inertia in the WPs, although this would have been expected (Nakshbande, 2020, p. 1, p. 50; cf. Carammia, Princen & Timmermans, 2016, p. 809; Wessels, 2016, p. 4), especially in light of some historical events, such as the migration crisis, Euro crisis, global financial crisis, and Brexit. Notably, in Figure 10, the peaks in concentration, the HHI index values, are much higher than average for policy response in 2012 (WP 2013) and 2017 (WP 2018). In the 2013 WP, Regional and Urban Policy and Planning (3%), Space, Science, Technology and Communications (1.5%), Transportation (1.3%), and Foreign Trade (1.2%) are the highest growers. In the 2018 WP, Macroeconomics (0.36%) and Law and Crime (0.14%) were the highest growers. None of these topic areas had been the highest growers in the Council Conclusions of the preceding interval period. When compared to Figure 11 and 12, these show a more synchronous relationship. For instance in 2013, when Regional and Urban Policy and Planning balloons on both agendas synchronously. Finally, an alternative explanation could be that the synchronous – so not the intertemporal correlation – could hide far greater interinstitutional correlations, and robustness checks point out that this is in fact the case. However, a synchronous correlation *an sich* cannot explain the provenance of the signal that caused openness to change or incidentally concentrations.

THE POLITICAL COLLEGE: INCREASED FRICTION OR OPEN TO CHANGE?

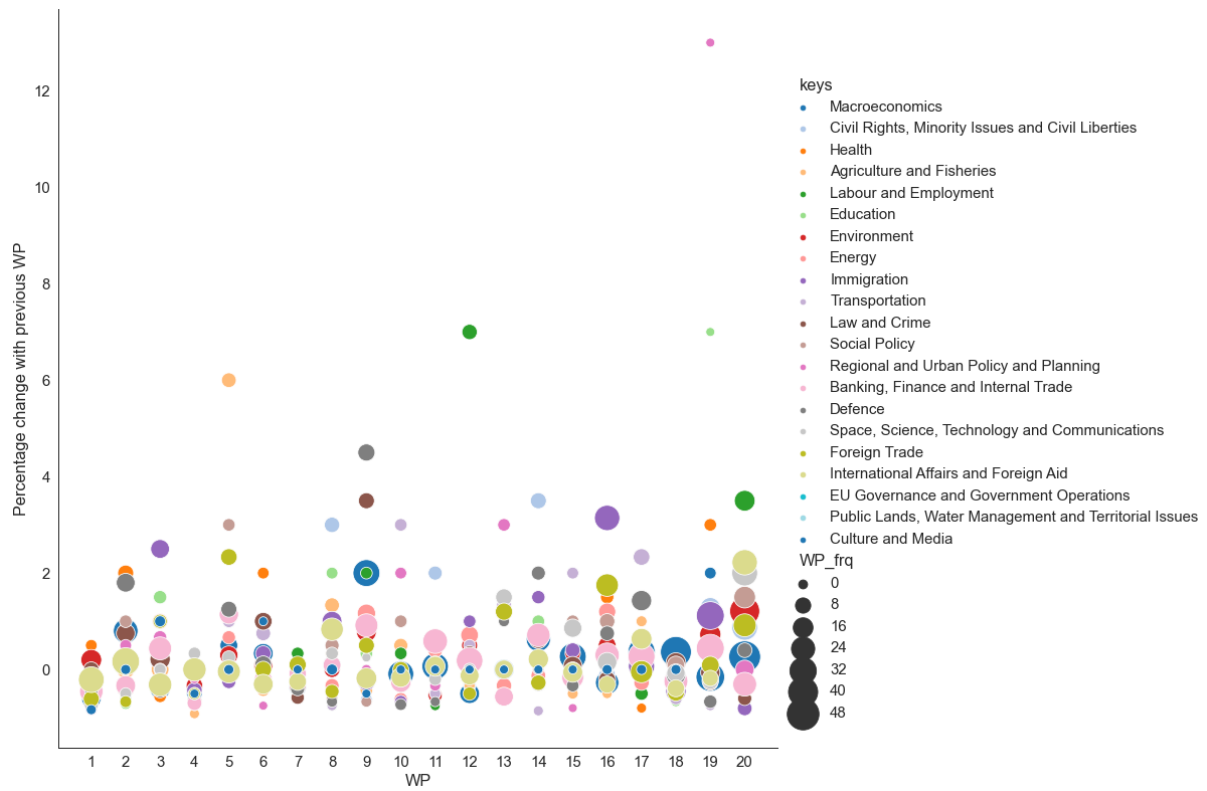


Figure 11 Absolute size, relative size and growth for the WPs

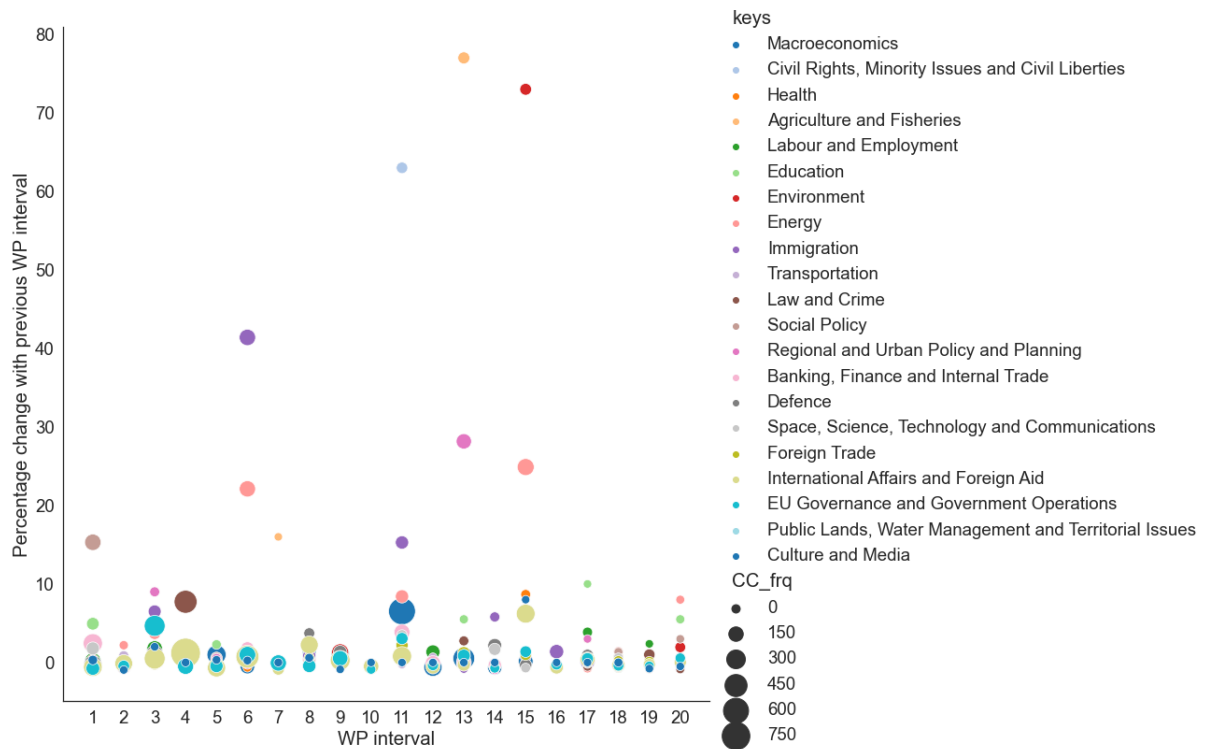


Figure 12 Absolute size, relative size and growth for the Council Conclusions

10. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

A cautious interpretation of the results shapes another piece to the EU puzzle, creating a clearer picture but also prompting new questions. The analysis assumes that the approximations of the attention distribution of the College and the Council provide an accurate picture of the real state of the world, and that the methodology shows an accurate picture of the longitudinal and cyclical patterns. In this discussion, firstly the research question is reflected on and provisionally answered, secondly the implications are deliberated on, laying out new questions for further enquiry, wrapped-up with the conclusion to this thesis.

10.1. Answering the research question

Looking at the research goal, which is to uncover when and under which conditions the policy agenda of the College of Commissioners of the EU is marked by inertia or by openness to change, the supposed institutional developments in the College, and those of the system in which the College operates, are likely to play a significant role. This thesis find initial proof for the simultaneous process of presidentialisation and politisation of the College (see Kassim, 2020; Kassim & Laffan, 2019).⁴⁷ Still, further efforts should point out with more conclusiveness what is the source of the “mandate” for the College to change its policy priorities.

On the one hand, the rejection of *H1* and confirmation of *H2* lead to a conclusion that the political composition and preferences in the Parliament might remain justifiably discounted in the framework for analysing attention to topic areas on the EU-policy agenda. After all, the elections, that have caused marked shifts in the political composition of that Parliament have, despite the formal and informal process of parliamentarisation, not led to marked shifts in attention, as was theorised would lead to a College that felt “more motivated” to change the priorities. On the other hand, however, a closer look at the Juncker Commission, which coincided with the rise of the Eurosceptic parties and the diminished grand coalition (EPP and PES), shows how parliamentarisation could have in fact been the *reason for* the marked

⁴⁷ The latter would be not only measured in the preference heterogeneity but also in the increasingly debated and scrutinised actions of the Commission (i.e. De Wilde et al., 2016; Follesdal & Hix, 2006; Bang, Jensen and Nedergaard, 2015 p. 196).

increase in inertia in the College. Additionally, the EPP remained strong in the College, providing the President and most Commissioners, which therefore cannot explain the increase in inertia.

This understanding of the accountability link between the College and the Parliament implies that the College has presidentialised. The President is increasingly able to steer the College's policy agenda. If electoral shifts in the Parliament have given impetus to a conservative agenda (see Treib, 2021; Hobolt & De Vries, 2016), and the President has constrained, at least some, policy entrepreneurship (Brooks & Bürgin, 2020), while switching to a more entrepreneurial modus only in the later stages of the mandate (Tömmel, 2020, p. 1141), priorities could be lagged to the extent, or moment in time, that the President *prefers*, or is motivated to pursue, an entrepreneurial agenda.

The confirmation of *H2* is of greater significance for future researchers studying the College, the Council and the interinstitutional dynamics between them, or the complete EU-policy system. The consistent increase in inertia, and the regularity with which the openness to change sets in, has been confirmed through different methods. To put it crudely, according to the results, increases in attention measured in the final WP could well be due to strongly delayed effects, and not sudden responsiveness caused by external events. The policy priorities from four years, or policy agendas, ago could finally make their way to the WP in the final publication. With some confidence, the results from the thesis might allow future researchers to consider the implications of the varied delayed response of the College to external signals due to increasing stickiness.

From this interpretation of the results, Nakshbande's (2020) causal relationship between the Council and the Commission could still stand. However, complemented with the results from this thesis, a counterhypothesis can be formulated as: the (inter)institutional dynamics are subject to periodic cyclicity, analogous to seasonality, from the varied levels of responsiveness. Whether or not these results are to be linked to stickiness, similar inquiries into the policy attention dynamics of the EU would be well advised to include a differenced variable, aimed at reducing periodic effects, for the Commission agenda in the inferential models. At the same time, one should be careful not to overcorrect for periodicity, instead merely controlling for such effects. Finally, admittedly, such effects could well have been translated from other cyclical patterns onto the Commission's agenda – boomeranging the caveat – yet the most likely cause, the Council, appears not to have been that source.

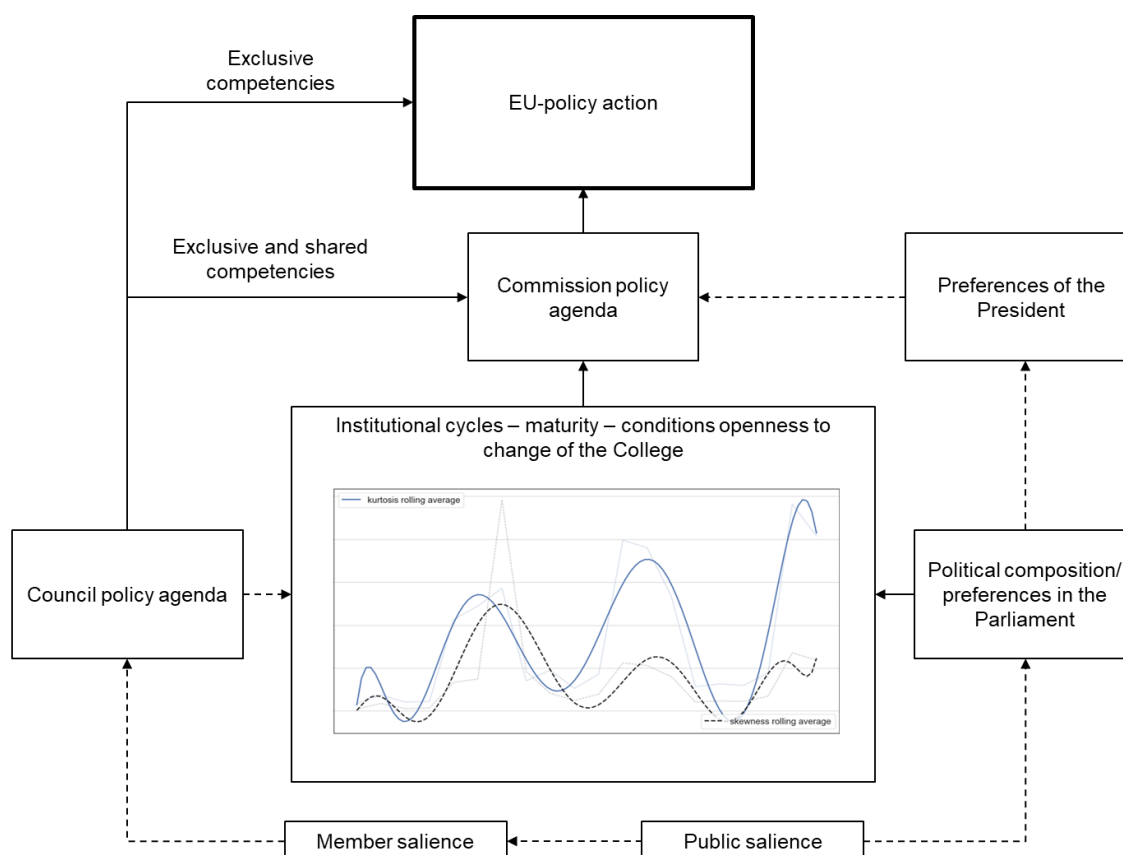
10.2. Implications: proposing a more comprehensive model

While cyclicity is inherent to the Downsian model, the periodically regular recurrence of and development in openness to change should be considered a separate control variable to the attention cycles for topic areas on the EU-policy agenda (either for the aggregate agenda or specific topics). Arguably, such integration should take note of the literature on the presidentialisation and parliamentarisation of the Commission in general and the College more specifically (Kassim, 2020; Brooks & Bürgin, 2020; Kassim & Laffan, 2019). Granted that the results are based on a relatively limited timeseries design, and that the exact reason for the increasing stickiness is still ambiguous, the argument that reforms towards democratisation have led to increases in institutional friction should justify the incorporation of a model that is usually better suited for democratic systems (i.e. Polsby, 1984; see also Breeman, 2009). To this end, Figure 12 proposes such a model for the College and the EU-policy system at large.

In Figure 12, the arrows indicate the direction of the effect. The dashed lines are relations that remain unclear in this thesis and the solid lines signify relations that can be more confidently assumed to hold close to the truth, at least from the results in this thesis. The model is based on Nakshbande's (2020) finding, *H0* in this thesis, that the Council's priorities are causally linked to the Commission policy agenda for both exclusive and shared competencies (see also Elias, 2019; Alexandrova et al., 2014; 2016). But it also poses that the composition of political groups and preferences in the Parliament conditions the openness to change of the College and its President, although the latter demands further exploration because it is primarily based on the most recent mandates, i.e. Juncker's term. It should be added that the link between the Council and the institutional cycle in the College also remains largely obscure (see the "Critical assumption" in Chapter 5.4.). Such is the need for additional analysis, that the proposed model should not be perceived as a definite version, but instead as one prompting new questions. In which part of the institutional cycle of the College does the Council have the greatest agenda-setting influence? Which topic areas are most affected by the institutional cycle in the College? Can the patterns in the attention dynamics of the Council and the Commission be explained by the crises of the 2010-2020 period?⁴⁸

⁴⁸ See for instance: Meissner and Schoeller (2019); Zeitlin, Nicoli and Laffan (2019); Schramm (2020).

Figure 13 A proposed model for agenda-setting integrating institutional cycles in the College and the EU-policy system at large



10.3. Limitations & reservations

The research strategy has attempted to further develop the framework for empirical analysis of the quasi-federal EU-policy system. However, no illusions were entertained as to the robustness or conclusiveness of the results⁴⁹. More pertinent still, the limitations of this research strategy should be laid out explicitly to presume appropriate reservations and caveats when reflecting upon its results and potentially proving conducive to further efforts.

The first limitation comes from the fact that the available historical records for assessing the strategic agenda for the Commission are limited to the period between 2000 and 2020. Usually, empirical research projects on Punctuated Equilibrium are comprehensively

⁴⁹ See Nakshbande (2020, p. 84) and the research design chapter of this thesis for a more elaborate discussion on the limitations of the approximation.

operationalised over a period of 30+ years because the omitted previous and subsequent periods could hide significant irregularities with the observed patterns. While Nakshbande (2020, p. 83) argues that “It would have been possible to draw on alternative sources to reconstruct the European Commission’s agenda”, such efforts would be highly susceptible to systematic error and methodological challenges. The marked shift in the nature of the WPs is already apparent within the limited timeframe focussed on in this thesis, exemplified by the frequency distributions.⁵⁰ In particular, Figures 7, 8 and 9 in the longitudinal segment of the results, are good examples of patterns that should be taken with some reservations because due to the limited timeseries, patterns might be deceptive.

The second limitation comes from the techniques and methods applied. Whereas the dependent variable focus has been operationalised to increase accuracy in the timeseries, this accuracy remains debatable due to a technical as well as a methodical reason. The former pertains to the limited potential of normality tests for analysis of lower levels of observations, referring for instance to the leptokurtosis and skewness tests. Such limitations are inherent to the analysis of the College because consistent measurable data has only existed since 2000, thus justifying a cautious approach. The latter problem comes from the possibility that the publication of the Council Conclusions and WPs are not as regular as, say, the annual publications of government budgets. For instance, the Council publishes marginally more Conclusions during crises, something that has also occurred with WPs. In 2010, during the Global Financial Crisis, the Commission published two WPs in a relatively short time span. Another example is the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with a late start of the Von der Leyen Commission, coinciding with three WPs published in 2020. To be specific, this could imply that aggregating policy attention at the WP interval level might have overstated shifts in attention in the Council. Consequently, thought-provokingly, the WPs could have also been extrapolated into calendar year intervals, aligning neatly to the Council Conclusions at the annual aggregate. While this would have created more artificial temporal regularity, the theme of this thesis, looking at “mandates”, prompted the need to opt for the political cut-off point.

Moreover, while some interdependency between the dependent variable and the independent variable is reconcilable with the research design, being based on cross-sectional

⁵⁰ See for instance Figure 7 quadrant I Prodi, where the first to frequency distributions differ significantly from the other two, and all other the units of observation. Closer inspection of the content of the WPs shows document types that differ from the others. At a glance, they appear to be less politically strategic and more “bureaucratically” rigorous.

and multifaceted models, this potential overstating should be noted for future efforts. The implications for causal relationships in this thesis are based on and aligned with findings that resulted from other methods (e.g. Nakshbande, 2020; Elias, 2019; Alexandrova, 2016) – adding a level of robustness. Still, future research could include the quinquennial strategic agenda published by the Council. Such an operationalisation could reduce interference from possible interdependencies between the variables, or even the cyclical patterns identified in the results section of this thesis. These strategic agendas are drafted to steer the College’s policy agenda explicitly and shape the Council’s policy agendas across Council Presidencies.

Finally, the entire premise of the operationalisation in this thesis is built on the assumption that the datasets provided are reliable and consistent. Due to the lack of transparency as to the content of the coded datasets, or at least for 95% of the observations, this assumption is subject to justified scrutiny. Be that as it may, in case of systematic or random error, this should not impair the soundness of the research design nor the theorised implications for the field of PET in the EU policy system. Although time constraints prevented the use of sophisticated semantic analytical software for automated text analysis (e.g. Lundgren et al., 2018), such an undertaking has become more realistic due to advances in practical and efficient programming tools, such as the ones used for this thesis.

11. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to find answers to which extent the Commission’s attention to topics on the policy agenda has measurably been affected by processes of parliamentarisation and presidentialisation. This goal was formulated in the research question: when and under which conditions is the policy agenda of the College of Commissioners – the political leadership – of the EU marked by inertia or by openness to change? The results in this thesis show that the College is an increasingly sticky executive, meaning that incumbency increases openness to change after an incubation time. Although the research design of this thesis cannot conclude definitively whether this openness to change is due to frictional pressures from internal sources, i.e. preference heterogeneity, or external sources, i.e. the Council, the Parliament or the public, the methods used indicate that in the setting of prospective policy priorities the role of the Council could well be overstated, and the role of the Parliament understated. By linking these findings back to the initial debate that was set out in the introduction and further elaborated on in the literature review, on the parliamentarisation and presidentialisation of the Commission

and its College, the following can be concluded. Firstly, while the EU is searching for an opportunity to underpin the democratic legitimacy and functioning of the European project as well as to uphold EU citizens' support for our common goals and values through a Conference on the Future of Europe, the purported functional element and democratic legitimacy are, according to these results, less obviously mutually reinforcing. So, while the introduction of democratic elements in the operations of the College have increased democratic accountability, the same process is associated with an increase in stickiness and reduced openness to change in the College, reducing its ability to efficiently react to electoral demands and societal needs. Such implications are conditional on the assumption that the patterns observed are not exceptions in a longer deviating trend.

The dual approach of this thesis was to deduce whether the interinstitutional agenda-setting dynamics remain present with alternative methods for measurement, while the inductive element sought to build – if not initiate – an extension of mandate effect theory into IOs more generally, and the Commission specifically. For the deductive part, the theoretical framework and research design build further on previous work that informed the *null* hypothesis for this thesis (cf. Nakshbande, 2020, p. 87). Thereafter, rather than presenting wholly new conceptual interpretations, this thesis attempts to give empirical clout to the presuppositions of parliamentarisation and presidentialisation (Kassim, 2020). The inductive element of this thesis proposes a new framework that synthesises the concepts from friction in IOs and the mandate effect, consolidating the bureaucratic, international relations and democratic systems concepts under mechanisms for internal and external friction and release within the PET framework, setting out new bases for future researchers on which to graft new branches. The deduction of the *null* hypothesis contributes to the debate by making the timeseries model based on the political calendar intervals of the dependent variables, instead of, arguably more arbitrary, calendar year intervals. This produced, if any, only marginally different results. However, the effects of this alternative systemisation are ambiguous due to the slightly different timeseries period that had been created by adding the 2020 WP and 2019 Council Conclusions. In any case, the dependent variable centred approach provides additional robustness to the modest but statistically significant association found between the distribution of attention to eight out of twenty policy areas in the Council and the Commission in the subsequent period.

A significant inductive result from this thesis, with more normative implications, is that the college is increasingly subject to effects of democratic opposition external to its system, perhaps due to parliamentarisation, while previously this friction was more internal, which has likely decreased due to presidentialisation. Starting from a quantitative descriptive analysis of

the College, the Council and the Parliament, longitudinal and periodically regular patterns were found that attest to the increasing significance of institutional cycles for the openness to change in the College. In light of PET, dramatic increases in attention to few issues – problems which the College had previously ignored – are an inevitable consequence of limited attention, due to zero-sum games. The mandate effect premise that newly elected executives commonly show greater openness to change and thus fewer ignored issues, conditioned by internal institutional friction, is consistently rejected. More significant for the empirical debate, this thesis also finds that the College is increasingly less open to change and periodically regular in its fluctuations between inertia and openness to change. Such findings complicate the inferential model for interinstitutional agenda-setting and provide additional caveats to research focussed on agenda dynamics of individual issues, too. In brief, increases in attention measured in the final WP of a mandate could well be due to strongly delayed effects and not sudden responsiveness caused by external events, including but not limited to electoral signals. In these cases, the policy priorities put on the shelves due to frictions finally make their way to the strategic agenda in the final stages, speaking truths to the title of Juncker’s final WP: “Delivering what we promised and preparing for the future”.

The key takeaway from this thesis for researchers is that one should be careful with the implementation of inferential models in interinstitutional frameworks more generally and in the interinstitutional framework of the EU specifically. While cyclicity is inherent to the Downsian model, the periodically regular recurrence of and development in openness to change should be considered a relevant and independent variable to changes in attention to topic areas on the (EU-)policy agenda. However, the research agenda that this postulation prompts should certainly not take these findings for granted. Instead, similar to the approach in this thesis, it should build further on the CAP coded agendas to detect, reduce and eliminate inconsistencies, improve with additional controls and find yet further, perhaps more granular, theoretical basis. Should such attempts cover the EU policy system, researchers are invited to consider the proposed model for agenda-setting that includes the conditioning effects of institutional cycles. All in all, the PET and CAP approach provide the tools to delve deeper into the nitty-gritty of the mechanisms that shape both the policy priorities individually, the processes through which they are formed and the system in which they take are manifested. Although challenging to operationalise, it is precisely the seeming incomparability through time and space of openness to change in changing institutions that underwrites the value of the PET for comparative Policy and Public Administration studies, certainly not the least for those broadening the scope internationally.

THE POLITICAL COLLEGE: INCREASED FRICTION OR OPEN TO CHANGE?

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Appendix B

Collected calculations and overviews

B I

Strategy for extrapolating the distributions to adjust to WP (2016-2020) publications intervals.

| WP negotiation intervals | WP | Number of conclusions and corresponding calendar year | Calculation Council conclusion distribution |
|--------------------------|----|---|---|
| 16-12-2014/ 27-10-2015 | 16 | 2014 (1); 2015 (5) | $n_{2014} * (1/6) + n_{2015} * (5/6)$ |
| 27-10-2015/ 25-10-2016 | 17 | 2015 (1); 2016 (5) | $n_{2015} * (1/6) + n_{2016} * (5/6)$ |
| 25-10-2016/ 24-10-2017 | 18 | 2016 (1); 2017 (6) | $n_{2016} * (1/7) + n_{2017} * (6/7)$ |
| 24-10-2017/ 23-10-2018 | 19 | 2017 (1); 2018 (5) | $n_{2017} * (1/6) + n_{2018} * (5/6)$ |
| 23-10-2018/ 29-01-2020 | 20 | 2018 (1); 2019 (8) | $n_{2018} * (1/9) + n_{2019} * (8/9)$ |

**n = number of issue observations*

B II

The Herfindahl-Hirschman index per WP and the rolling average kurtosis results for the frequency distributions of percentual change per topic area per maturity level, 2000-2020

| WP for year | HHI | Kurtosis on rolling average | Spearman R between the HHI and the kurtosis on N=3 retrospective rolling average | |
|-------------|-------|-----------------------------|--|----------|
| 00 | 0.070 | | | |
| 01 | 0.095 | 0.8698 | Correlation coefficient (rho) | 0.462874 |
| 02 | 0.115 | 1.8516 | P-value | 0.039863 |
| 03 | 0.095 | 1.0384 | | |
| 04 | 0.130 | 1.107 | | |

THE POLITICAL COLLEGE: INCREASED FRICTION OR OPEN TO CHANGE?

| WP for year | HHI | Kurtosis on rolling average | Spearman R between the HHI and the kurtosis on N=3 retrospective rolling average |
|-------------|-------|-----------------------------|--|
| 05 | 0.095 | 10.646 | |
| 06 | 0.115 | 12.223 | |
| 07 | 0.100 | 14.286 | |
| 08 | 0.110 | 3.5037 | |
| 09 | 0.085 | 4.7491 | |
| 10 | 0.105 | 2.6285 | |
| 11 | 0.115 | 4.3108 | |
| 12 | 0.105 | 19.892 | |
| 13 | 0.150 | 18.996 | |
| 14 | 0.090 | 13.348 | |
| 15 | 0.085 | 2.8375 | |
| 16 | 0.075 | 3.1515 | |
| 17 | 0.075 | 2.9829 | |
| 18 | 0.140 | 4.4276 | |
| 19 | 0.080 | 24.069 | |
| 20 | 0.075 | 20.38 | |

B III

Access to and instruction for using the code that has produced the results in his thesis

1. **The data can be accessed here:**

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Qj-NmyXS11rWcZJAffspz2kuP4K4YIK/view?usp=sharing>

2. **The code can be accessed here:**

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1p37DFeCILFxCswOwmAWA2nwg5qAk5cVI/view?usp=sharing>

3. The data should be loaded in the same location as the code. The free Python programme should be installed, and the code run to produce the results or scrutinise the methods.