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National interest versus the common good: The Presidency in European Council agenda setting

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

Keywords: European Union; agenda setting; European Council; European Council Presidency

The European Council Presidency and Agenda setting

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

A key venue of attention and agenda setting during the term of a Presidency is the European Council. Until the Treaty of Lisbon, the Council was an

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unofficial institution where EU leaders met, but it had, and still has, remarkable powers. The Council became operative in 1975 as an intergovernmental body composed of the Heads of State or Government of the Member States of the EU.[1] It does not have a formally fixed term of office, and its composition changes constantly as executives in the Member States change. As the highest body of political decision making in the EU, the European Council is expected to express the common interest and unity among its members on a broad range of topics. It also takes the lead in designing the institutional architecture of the EU. The number of meetings during each six-month Presidency initially fluctuated between one and two, but since the late 1990s, having three or four meetings (some of them usually informal) also became common.

The use of the institutional position of the EU Presidency received some scholarly attention, but only rarely with a focus on the European Council as opposed to the Council of Ministers. This is surprising given the central role of the former in EU agenda setting and influence in other Union institutions (Princen & Rhinard 2006; Werts 2008). Much of the existing work analyses single Presidencies held for six months and considers success or failure in terms of leadership, ambition, skills of negotiation and brokerage, as well as the ability to implement the initial programme.[2] These evaluations sometimes focus on particular issues pushed up or down the agenda during a Presidency term. For example, in a study of the Portuguese Presidency in the second half of 2007, Ferreira-Pereira (2008: 69) observes that 'the Portuguese government succeeded in uploading certain specificities of national foreign policy to the European level'. Accounts of single Presidencies, however, may not be representative of the level of national influence whenever the institutional privileges associated with the Presidency are used. As Schout and Vanhoonacker (2006: 1073) note, assessments of single terms often are 'strongly influenced by the heat of the moment'.

Beyond such evaluations, there are a few general studies analysing Presidencies across countries.[3] Research on the three Scandinavian Member States suggests that the Presidency functions mostly as an amplifier of national interests (Bengtsson et al. 2004). Likewise, in a study on Presidencies held by seven countries in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Elgström and Tallberg (2003: 193) conclude that 'the core property of Presidency priorities [is that] they constitute national interests'. These observations suggest that Member States holding the Presidency, first of all, use this position of institutional privilege to influence the EU agenda. However, other studies emphasise the limits of Presidency agenda-setting power. Behavioural norms of neutrality, consensus-building and effectiveness are considered to be constraints on the possibilities for agenda influence (Niemann & Mak 2010). Similar effects are ascribed to unfavourable domestic political conditions (Bunse 2009; Kirchner 1992;

Quaglia & Moxon-Browne 2006) or to factors related to the nature of the European Council – in particular the inheritance of items from previous meetings and the attention given to focusing events (Bunse 2009; Hayes-Renshaw & Wallace 2006; Princen & Rhinard 2006; Thomson 2008; Voss & Bailleul 2002; Warntjen 2008a, 2008b).

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

Institutional properties of the European Council and its Presidency

The European Council came into existence in 1975 after some twenty years of irregular summitry (Von Donat 1987). The office of the Presidency[4] dates further back in time. It is one of the oldest structural elements in the Community, first referred to in the 1957 Treaty of Rome, which stipulates that the 'office of President shall be held for a term of six months by each member of the Council in turn'. As Werts (1992) argues, the establishment of the European Council created a new function – the President-in-Office of the European Council – a crucial role, which entailed a position of spokesman for the Member States and chief person in charge of the meetings organised by this new body. Thus, with the introduction of regular meetings of the Heads of State and Government, in 1975, the status of the EU Presidency was elevated further (Von Donat 1987) and acquired more responsibilities (Kirchner 1992). The European Council meetings became 'the president's show' (Hayes-Renshaw & Wallace 2006: 178). With growing enlargement, it became increasingly difficult to take the positions of all leaders into account and countries had to wait longer for their turn in office. This led to worries about the Presidency becoming overburdened, or even inert, and prompted the Heads of State and Government to seek a better solution for chairing meetings. With the entry into

force of the Treaty of Lisbon, a 'permanent' President was introduced for the European Council, while the rotating Presidency system was maintained for meetings of the Council of Ministers.

The European Council is considered the informal agenda setter of the EU (Werts 1992, 2008) and an institution at the 'heart of EU decision making' with respect to the 'overall parameters of the EU system' (Nugent 2010: 162–163). Although the European Commission has a monopoly over legislative initiatives, the impulse for legislative proposals often comes from the European Council. At their meetings, the Heads of State and Government are free to discuss any issue they consider relevant (Hayes-Renshaw & Wallace 2006; Nugent 2010; Werts 2008). The functions of the European Council may lead us to expect a bias towards foreign policy, EU institutional architecture and economic development, but in reality a broad range of topics within (and beyond) Community decision making is addressed (Alexandrova et al. 2012; Werts 2008). The 'European Council Conclusions'[5] are the instruments through which the institution exercises its agenda-setting power (Hayes-Renshaw & Wallace 2006). These documents contain the issues that have been discussed by the Heads of State and Government and the agreements that have been reached. The EU leaders often directly delegate a task to the institutions and even Member States: they ask the Commission to investigate a problem or make proposals, urge the Council to speed up decision making, establish a new committee to draw a report on a hot topic (e.g., the Committee of Wise Men), encourage Member States to coordinate their policies in a particular field and so on. However, the European Council also acts as a final arbiter on complex questions and solely takes decisions on key appointments and changes in the institutional infrastructure of the Community. Therefore, the Conclusions represent an agenda at midpoint of the policy process – receiving input signals from other institutions, but also producing output decisions (Alexandrova et al. 2012). In short, the Conclusions have both a direct and an indirect impact on the agenda of the EU at different stages of the policy process.

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

position in relation to third countries, international organisations and the media (coordinating and representative roles).

In agenda setting, the Presidency can use various mechanisms to promote topics that are of major domestic importance. First, it can propose political initiatives, press for the inclusion of discussion points and structure the agenda. The drafting and finalisation of European Council Conclusions play a key role here. For example, Sweden – a promoter of environmental issues – managed to achieve an agreement on an EU strategy for sustainable development at the Göteborg European Council in June 2001, which received broad attention in the Conclusions (Bjurulf 2003). Second, during meetings, the Presidency can moderate the discussions and allocate time for addressing different topics. This may even involve pushing a topic away from the agenda against expectations of other countries. Such negative agenda setting then leads to minimal attention to the topic in the Conclusions. For example, in its focus on a single core priority – enlargement – the Danish Presidency of 2002 managed to 'put on the backburner' a pressing and recurring issue: the Convention on the Future of Europe (Bengtsson et al. 2004; Friis 2003). Third, since the 1990s it is common for the Presidency to organise informal and special (thematic) European Council meetings besides the general ones.[6] These special summits are held in order to address specific topics, as was the case with the Birmingham European Council of 1992, which adopted a declaration on 'community close to its citizens' and the November meeting of the Luxembourg European Council in 1997, which produced an agreement on employment. While informal meetings usually do not produce Conclusions, they are convened in order to create a comfortable atmosphere for building consensus in formal summits that follow.

Two rival expectations about Presidency agenda setting

While the office of the Presidency provides opportunities for leaving a national mark on the European Council agenda, the literature disagrees over the de facto utilisation of this institutional advantage. One expectation about the actual agenda-setting power of the Presidency is the exploitation of the office for the pursuit of national goals. Tallberg (2008) suggests that agenda management is one of the core powers of the Presidency. This includes possibilities for influencing the agenda via introduction of new issues, placing emphasis on particular issues and excluding issues from the agenda (Tallberg 2003). Such agenda management possibilities may lead Member States in charge of the office to promote and push national interests (Sherrington 2000; Van Grinsven 2003). Some empirical evidence exists in support of this view (Elgström & Tallberg 2003). A number of case studies present examples of countries that

managed to upload national interests and shift attention to domestically preferred topics on the EU agenda (Garel-Jones 1993; Manners 2003; Morata & Fernández 2003). Particular utilisation of the office even made some scholars suggest that expression of national interests is among the tasks of each Presidency (Schout & Vanhoonacker 2005). Although this notion is generally contested (Bulmer & Wessels 1987; Kietz 2007), it suggests there is no clear division between the political position of the Member State and the institutional logic of appropriateness for holding the Presidency. Often, attempts are made to present initiatives and preferred policies as European – that is, as benefiting the whole Community. Wessels (2008) notes that the Presidency always provides political impulses by linking domestic interests to EU plans and projects. This increases the chances of getting a proposal accepted and allows for integrating national priorities. For an issue to be discussed in the EU arena it needs to be framed as an EU problem in need of EU action, and not just national consideration (Princen 2009). Yet a 'truly European' policy image may be a cover for what is actually a national interest.[7] While the Presidency may be tempted to influence agendas on various levels in the EU, the politically elevated position of the European Council means that its agenda would be the primary target. As an intergovernmental institution, the European Council typically is an arena associated with the national interests of Member States (Tallberg & Johansson 2008). The informal nature of the Conclusions, and their important implications for EU policy making, add to this choice of venue for promoting topics of national importance when a Member State controls the Presidency.

A rival expectation about the effective agenda-setting power of the Presidency is that common matters prevail over topics derived from the national political agenda. This expectation is based on the neutrality norm, codified in the Presidency Handbook of the Council Secretariat (General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union 1997), and the assumptions that the Presidency should strive for consensus building and effectiveness in joint action (Elgström 2003; Niemann & Mak 2010). These norms are meant to help avoid national interests from becoming dominant during a Presidency term, even though no formal sanctions are applied in case of violation. A Presidency may observe the norms in order to present itself as a reliable partner, committed to the goals of European integration (see, e.g., Verhoeff & Niemann 2011). It also may trade off issues of lesser importance and consider it in its national interest to smooth the process of agreement within the European Council (Bunse 2009; Niemann & Mak 2010). Such process goals differ from pursuing substantive policy interests upon which other Member States may disagree. Finally, the neutrality norm also appears by default when a presiding country simply is unable to construct the agenda in its preferred way as other Member States do not support the priority list or openly disagree with it. For this reason, Presidency norm compliance

sometimes may be seen as contingent on the Member State's 'individual will' and the 'ability to violate' (Niemann & Mak 2010: 733–734).

Besides norms, two other sets of factors may constrain the Presidency and its use of the institutional advantage. One is related to domestic political conditions, the other to the nature of the European Council as an institution in the EU policy process. Elections and subsequent problems in forming coalition governments, or unstable cabinets, hinder strategies of national interest. If national actors, such as coalition parties, fail to agree over a common agenda, or even fail to build a viable government to begin with, the 'national interest' in agenda setting and prioritising matters for immediate consideration acquires little meaning (Bunse 2009; Kirchner 1992). Referenda on EU issues or eurosceptic public opinion may have similar distorting effects on setting clear targets of national interest. Furthermore, it is argued that at European Council meetings items often are inherited from previous summits (Thomson 2008; Warntjen 2008a) and drafts of the Conclusions are prepared at lower levels beforehand, making the European Council a rubber-stamping device (Hayes-Renshaw & Wallace 2006). In addition, focus events such as international conflicts, disasters and major political or economic shocks limit the agenda space for the Presidency to address those issues listed according to its preference (Bunse 2009; Hayes-Renshaw & Wallace 2006; Princen 2009; Princen & Rhinard 2006; Voss & Bailleul 2002). Time and attention of EU leaders is always scarce. Thus, domestic political constraints on agenda-setting capacity, policy legacy and the need to respond to events are said to limit the freedom of manoeuvre and the strategic opportunity for a Member State holding the Presidency.[8]

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

Analysing agenda impact

If the Presidency is used to follow topics of national importance in European Council agenda setting, we may expect that the Member State holding the office tries to dictate what issues get attention within its six-month term. We

prefer to speak of 'topics of national importance on the domestic agenda' rather than use the rather ambiguous term 'national interest'. How is it to be determined whether this type of agenda effect actually happens? Analysis of Presidency programmes may reveal some of the national priorities, but these are only the input to European Council meetings. Moreover, the programmes have changed over time and since 2003 they officially come in form of multi-annual strategic plans and annual operational programmes, involving more than one country in the agenda schedules. A more systematic approach to measure Presidency influence on the European Council agenda requires analysis of the national policy agenda relative to the immediate output of European Council meetings.

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

We use a dataset of European Council Conclusions covering the entire period since this institution became operative in 1975. A Presidency semester contains between one and three Conclusions, which we aggregate per half-year term. To estimate national agenda effects, we analyse national executive speeches presented immediately before a Presidency term (see Appendix 1).[9] We take a sample of five EU Member States for which systematic data on annual executive policy agendas are available. The five countries are: Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom. These countries represent variation in size and length of EU membership, and each has taken the Presidency of the Council several times. We exclude two Presidency terms in the analysed period: Denmark in 1987, which produced no written Conclusions; and Spain in 2010, when the permanent President of the European Council was already active as the Lisbon Treaty took force the year before. The analysis covers a total of 25 Presidency terms over the period 1976–2008.

Table 1. Summary descriptive statistics on attention to topics

	Agenda EU	Agenda DK	Agenda ES	Agenda FR	Agenda NL	Agenda UK
Mean	0.045	0.045	0.045	0.045	0.045	0.045
Standard deviation	0.071	0.055	0.065	0.083	0.043	0.052
Minimum	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Maximum	0.470	0.315	0.330	0.659	0.273	0.277

All documents are content coded at quasi-sentence level by different national teams using country and EU versions of the codebook developed in the Comparative Agendas Project, which contains some twenty major policy topic categories and over 200 subtopics.[10] In this analysis we use only the major topics. Some adjustments of categories were made.[11] The final coding scheme includes 22 policy fields (see Appendix 2). The length of national executive speeches varies, as does the volume of text in the Conclusions. Therefore, we analyse attention to policy topics as shares of the whole agenda, and not in terms of absolute numbers of statements. While the minimum attention given to a single topic is 0 per cent, the maximum varies between 27 and 66 per cent (see Table 1). The mean topic attention on each agenda is 4.54 per cent and the standard deviation ranges between 4.3 and 8.3 per cent. Jurisdictional boundaries do not affect the types of agendas we are studying. The European Council often discusses issues beyond the decision-making powers of the EU institutions, and national executives also experience no constraints in this respect. While there is variation in the attention to topics across the agendas, the functional similarity between the executive speeches and the Conclusions is manifested further in general attention scores. The two most prominent themes on the European Council and all the national executive agendas, except Spain,[12] are foreign policy and macroeconomics. Topics such as agriculture, energy, science and technology, and culture rarely attract much attention from national leaders in the policy agendas they compose annually, in their home countries and at the summits. Each of these topics constitutes less than 2 per cent of the total policy agenda.

We test whether the attention to major topics on the agenda of a Member State can predict the attention given to these topics on the European agenda. This does not mean that we expect specific issues belonging to main policy fields to be exactly the same on both agendas, but if a topic is important at home, a country in pursuit of such national topic during its Presidency term may be expected to advocate broad attention to it on the European Council

agenda. For example, if Denmark stresses environmental issues domestically and seeks to influence the European Council agenda in line with this national priority, this behaviour may be visible in more attention to the environment in the Conclusions. If no such effect occurs, this indicates absence of national topic driven influence on the European Council agenda. It must be appreciated that absence of effects of domestic topic pursuit may point to failing attempts to exploit institutional privilege, but such attempts are not given. As we mentioned above, the behavioural repertoire of the Presidency also includes adherence to norms and rules as they emerged with the office. Member States taking the Presidency may refrain from pursuing domestic topics and interests and decide to act otherwise in agenda setting.

Our analysis proceeds in two steps. First, we conduct a survey of all available case studies on the 25 Presidencies held by the five countries in our sample. The case study selection is only based on studies discussing the use of the Presidency office for domestically important policy themes. Then we calculate simple Pearson correlations between the European Council agenda and the executive agenda of the Presidency holders. We match the main results of the case studies with the correlations in order to see how much the findings from individual case studies correspond to the correlations derived from our data. This first step is used for data validation. Then we proceed to the actual test for Presidency effect and conduct fractional logit regressions. Our dependent variable is the share of attention spent on a single topic on the agenda of the European Council. Since the agenda consists of 22 topics and the total attention for each time period is 100 per cent, the share of attention to a given topic can range between 0 (no attention to this topic) and 1 (all attention given to it). It is very unlikely that the agenda ever contains just one topic, but it may not always contain all topics at the same time. Some may not get any agenda space at different points in time. We use a fractional logit regression model, as proposed by Papke and Wooldridge (1996). This technique is developed specifically for dependent variables which represent proportions: range from 0 to 1 and can take many observations at the two extremes.[13]

Testing for institutional advantage in agenda setting

Table 2 shows the Pearson correlations between the European Council agenda and the executive agenda of the country in charge of the Presidency. It also shows summarised findings from existing research addressing the actual level of pursuit of nationally important policy topics in the EU. Comparing the correlation scores with the results of these case studies, we can see high correspondence, validating our data. The survey of case studies shows that

Table 2. Case study survey of national agenda effect of the Presidency and Pearson correlations of the European Council agenda and the national executive agenda of the presiding country

Presidency	MS	Literature	Source	Correlation
July–December 1986	UK	Committed to efficiency and 'tempered by cautious realism'.	Wallace (1986)	0.141
January–June 1989	ES	Leading goal of the Presidency: to present itself as a reliable and efficient partner, committed to Community interests.	Morata & Fernández (2003)	0.114
July–December 1992	UK	Presidency accused of drift and pursuing of national agenda at the expense of Community goals.	Garel-Jones (1993)	0.632***
July–December 1995	ES	Attempt to profile Spain as a big European power and push for domestic interests.	Morata & Fernández (2003)	0.241
January–June 1997	NL	Modest approach: no attempts to realise national priorities, acting rather as facilitator and honest broker.	Van Keulen & Rood (2003)	0.349
January–June 1998	UK	Strong attempt at agenda shaping: quite a level of achievement of domestic priorities, higher than during the previous British Presidency of 1992.	Manners (2003)	0.759***
July–December 2000	FR	Absence of clear priorities: a Presidency overshadowed by one goal – signing the Treaty of Nice; some interest in defence issues.	Costa et al. (2003); Lequesne (2001)	0.408*

January–June 2002	ES	Strategic player approach: trying to push for national interests within the limits of the institutionally designated role of a Presidency holder; not managing to present its interests in a way that would seem acceptable for agreement among all leaders.	Morata & Fernández (2003)	0.304
July–December 2002	DK	Double-sided goal: to convince the domestic public of the merits of European integration and the European partners of the European commitment of Denmark; successful in achieving major priorities (especially enlargement), while leaving other issues to lag behind.	Bengtsson et al. (2004)	0.430**
July–December 2004	NL	More stress on 'process management' than on national priorities as a means to increase Dutch standing internationally and 'feed' Europeanisation at home.	Van Keulen & Pijpers (2004)	0.463**
July–December 2005	UK	Not much leeway for initiative: a Presidency under the stamp of the negative referenda on the EU Constitution, expected to bring back on track the integration process.	Oppermann (2006)	0.443**
July–December 2008	FR	A 'hectic agenda' oriented towards occurring crises rather than consistent predetermined priorities.	Dehousse & Menon (2009)	0.337

Notes: * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Presidencies with a reputed strong national imprint on the European agenda are the ones for which we find high agenda correlation levels. The reverse also appears true: lower correlations match with case study findings of Presidencies that did not, or could not, push for domestic preferences.[14] Besides pointing out the relevance of our data for the comparative quantitative analysis we intend to undertake, these findings suggest some variation in the extent to which the two types of agendas are related during Presidency terms, and more often display low correlations. While sometimes a Presidency holder succeeds in advocating a domestic agenda in the European policy arena, this success is quite limited and occurs infrequently.

We now turn to the fractional logit models for each of the five countries in our sample. Our independent variables are the proportions of attention to topics on each of the national executive agendas. We have created dummy variables to distinguish for each of the semesters in the analysed period, whether a country was presiding or not. By looking at the interaction effects between a national agenda and a Presidency dummy, we can see whether holding the Presidency makes a difference in influencing the European Council agenda. We report coefficients and marginal effects with robust standard errors and significance levels in Table 3.

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

The coefficients of a fractional logit regression are hard to interpret directly; it is more meaningful to consider marginal effects. The marginal effect of the predictor variable is the derivative of the conditional probability of predicting the dependent variable. In our case, the marginal effects show how much change in the proportion of attention on the European Council agenda will be caused by a unit (i.e., 1 percentage point) attention change on any of the national agendas,[15] measured at the average predicted mean for the European Council agenda. For example, the marginal effect of 1 unit increase of the share of attention to a single topic on the Danish executive agenda, leads to a 0.33

Table 3. Fractional logit: Predicting the European Council agenda by the national executive agendas and testing for Presidency effect

	Model 1		Model 2					
	Coefficient	RSE	Coefficient	RSE	Deviance	Pseudo-LL	N	Marginal effects
Agenda DK	8.643***	(0.859)	8.656***	(0.869)	35.223	−75.802	550	0.331***
Pr. DK	−0.089	(0.207)	−0.084	(0.212)				−0.003
Agenda DK * Pr. DK	1.021	(1.784)	0.983	(1.822)				0.039
Pr. Nr.			0.002	(0.009)	35.220	−75.801	550	
Constant	−3.568***	(0.089)	−3.590***	(0.160)				
Agenda ES	5.577***	(1.130)	5.591***	(1.136)	23.519	−50.356	352	0.229***
Pr. ES	0.154	(0.248)	0.159	(0.245)				0.007
Agenda ES * Pr. ES	−2.418	(1.782)	−2.427	(1.779)				−0.100
Pr. Nr.			0.003	(0.019)	23.516	−50.355	352	
Constant	−3.367***	(0.111)	−3.425***	(0.356)				
Agenda FR	5.066***	(0.485)	5.087***	(0.476)	37.084	−76.733	550	0.200***
Pr. FR	0.054	(0.178)	0.048	(0.182)				0.002
Agenda FR * Pr. FR	−0.325	(1.510)	−0.322	(1.516)				−0.013
Pr. Nr.			0.004	(0.009)	37.063	−76.723	550	
Constant	−3.388***	(0.080)	−3.442***	(0.143)				
Agenda NL	11.435***	(1.102)	11.574***	(1.085)	35.783	−76.083	550	0.437***
Pr. NL	−0.043	(0.197)	−0.030	(0.197)				−0.002
Agenda NL * Pr. NL	0.537	(2.275)	0.534	(2.211)				0.021
Pr. Nr.			0.007	(0.009)	35.722	−76.052	550	
Constant	−3.698***	(0.095)	−3.805***	(0.167)				
Agenda UK	11.539***	(0.825)	11.548***	(0.826)	29.779	−73.081	550	0.414***
Pr. UK	0.064	(0.192)	0.066	(0.192)				0.002
Agenda UK * Pr. UK	−0.871	(1.955)	−0.874	(1.957)				−0.031
Pr. Nr.			0.002	(0.009)	29.773	−73.078	550	
Constant	−3.782***	(0.090)	−3.812***	(0.147)				

Notes: The table includes five separate models for each of the five countries. RSE = Robust standard errors (given in parentheses); Pr. MS = Presidency of the respective Member State (dummy); Pr. Nr. = count number of the Presidency. * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

percentage point increase in the share of attention to a given topic on the European Council agenda at its predicted mean of 4 per cent average topic attention. Similarly, a 1 percentage point attention share increase on the Spanish agenda produces a 0.23 percentage point rise in attention on the EU level at a predicted European Council attention mean of 4.3 per cent. For France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, a 1 percentage point increase of attention on their national agendas will lead to 0.20, 0.44 and 0.42 percentage point attention increases in the European Council at predicted average means of 4.1, 4.0 and 3.7 per cent, respectively.[16]

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

Reconsidering the image of the Presidency

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

This result suggests that the alternative expectation about the institutional position of the Presidency is closer to the reality of European Council agenda setting. This rival expectation includes an emphasis on common problems, not

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

Conclusion

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

In this article, we analysed 25 Presidency semesters of five different EU Member States throughout the period 1976–2008 in order to confront the different expectations with systematic empirical data. While for each country there is some effect from the national executive agenda on the first of the next following agenda of the European Council, the Presidency office does not appear to make a difference. The alleged institutional advantage of the Presidency in agenda setting has more diffused benefits which are not concentrated in the hands of the Member State in charge of this office. Political conditions

and institutional norms further diffuse these agenda benefits. This may be good news for the balance of powers across Member States in setting the agenda of the EU, which is delicate and always sensitive to political disruption. It also means, however, that national influence on the European Council agenda is less structured by institutional design, and more by actual political power relationships between Member States. The European Council displays its intergovernmental nature. Our findings in this analysis also indicate that the introduction of a permanent President of the European Council has not removed a venue previously exploited for directing the European policy agenda towards domestic goals. In this sense, then, the agenda effects of the Presidency must be seen more in terms of balancing a diversity of national interests and topics raised by the Member States.

This contribution focused on the recurring expectation in the literature that national priorities drive the formation of the European Council agenda when Member States are in charge of the Presidency. We must be cautious with empirical generalisation, but the variation in the sample of five Member States, and the long time frame of our analysis, provides good reasons to conclude that the institutional advantage hypothesis is not well grounded empirically. Our findings suggest some ways for further research on agenda-setting in the European Council. Empirical work may be done to analyse how behavioural rules lead Member States taking the Presidency to perform the roles of balancing and diffusing benefits of attention to problems. What topics are sensitive to agenda inheritance, how do new issues intrude on the agenda, and what is the role of focus events that may propel issues that were not anticipated? Thus, the role of the Presidency may be investigated by considering both programmed problem attention and topics that were not foreseen within the time horizon of national leaders gathered in the European Council. Which issues are stickier on the agenda than others? Further empirical work also may link the study of agenda setting in the European Council and the actual leadership and negotiation powers manifest in the meetings held by this institution. How do informal meetings play a part; what is the composition of the agenda of such meetings compared to the formal Conclusions that are published? Finally, if national priorities to problems in the country with the Presidency are not imposed on the European Council agenda, is this maybe because policy agendas are converging between EU Member States? These types of analyses may help us to better understand how the EU, as a multilayered political system, addresses major policy problems and to see how responsive it really is in the face of so much critique of democratic deficit. It also may help us understand how the Presidency is, above all, an office for performing balancing acts among a diversity of Member States.

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Appendix 1. Timing of executive speeches and Presidencies

Presidency	Denmark	France	The Netherlands	Spain	United Kingdom
July–December 1976	7 October 1975	31 December 1975	16 September 1975		19 November 1975
January–June 1977	5 October 1976	31 December 1976	21 September 1976		24 November 1976
January–June 1978	4 October 1977	31 December 1977	20 September 1977		3 November 1977
January–June 1979	3 October 1978	31 December 1978	19 September 1978		1 November 1978
January–June 1981	7 October 1980	31 December 1980	16 September 1980		20 November 1980
July–December 1981	7 October 1980	31 December 1980	16 September 1980		20 November 1980
July–December 1982	6 October 1981	31 December 1981	15 September 1981		4 November 1981
January–June 1984	4 October 1983	31 December 1983	20 September 1983		22 June 1983
January–June 1986	1 October 1985	31 December 1985	17 September 1985		6 November 1985
July–December 1986	1 October 1985	31 December 1985	17 September 1985	15 October 1985	6 November 1985
January–June 1989	4 October 1988	31 December 1988	20 September 1988	24 February 1988	22 November 1988
July–December 1989	4 October 1988	31 December 1988	20 September 1988	24 February 1988	22 November 1988
July–December 1991	2 October 1990	31 December 1990	18 September 1990	20 March 1991	7 November 1990
July–December 1992	1 October 1991	31 December 1991	17 September 1991	24 March 1992	6 May 1992
January–June 1993	6 October 1992	31 December 1992	15 September 1992	24 March 1992	6 May 1992
January–June 1995	4 October 1994	31 December 1994	20 September 1994	19 April 1994	16 November 1994
July–December 1995	4 October 1994	31 December 1994	20 September 1994	8 February 1995	16 November 1994
January–June 1997	1 October 1996	31 December 1996	17 September 1996	3 May 1996	23 October 1996
January–June 1998	7 October 1997	31 December 1997	16 September 1997	11 June 1997	14 May 1997
July–December 2000	5 October 1999	31 December 1999	21 September 1999	25 April 2000	17 November 1999
January–June 2002	2 October 2001	31 December 2001	18 September 2001	26 June 2001	20 June 2001
July–December 2002	2 October 2001	31 December 2001	18 September 2001	26 June 2001	20 June 2001
July–December 2004	7 October 2003	31 December 2003	16 September 2003	15 April 2004	26 November 2003
July–December 2005	5 October 2004	31 December 2004	21 September 2004	11 May 2005	17 May 2005
July–December 2008	2 October 2007	31 December 2007	18 September 2007	4 July 2007	6 November 2007

Note: Countries holding the Presidency are indicated in light grey boxes. The executive agenda of Spain is considered only after the country became a member of the EU.

Appendix 2. Matched policy agendas codes

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

Notes

1. European Community at that time.
2. See, e.g., Peter Ludlow's Briefing Notes, Presidency evaluations in the *Journal of Common Market Studies Annual Reviews*, occasional papers of the Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (SIEPS) and some others cited in this article.
3. Several cross-country comparative analyses of Presidency power exist with respect to a single policy field – that of environment (Warntjen 2007; Wurzel 1996, 2004).
4. As Westlake and Galloway (2004) note, the Presidency is neither a body nor a formal institution and the best way to refer to it is as an office or a function.
5. Until the Treaty of Lisbon, these documents were formally called 'Presidency Conclusions'. The terms 'European Council Conclusions', 'Presidency Conclusions' and 'the Conclusions' are used interchangeably in this article.
6. Not to be confused with the extraordinary meetings, which are follow-ups of focus events.
7. This strategy not only occurs in connection to the Presidency. Member States more generally try to sell domestically favoured solutions as 'in the best interest of the EU'. However, the literature on Presidency agenda-setting power underlines that the office provides an institutional advantage for achieving domestically determined goals.
8. Countries may also make strategic use of these conditions. An unanticipated focus event could open a window of opportunity, and even domestic political trouble sometimes may be tackled more effectively when the national political leadership has an institutional possibility for venue access in the EU. In general, however, they are considered constraints on the possibility of pushing national interests.
9. Differences in the length of the periods between the holding of a speech and the beginning of a Presidency exist across all, and within some, of the countries due to the different time points at which the speeches are held.
10. See, e.g., the British codebook at: www.policyagendas.org.uk

11. Most significantly, the topic 'immigration' was created (initially not present as a major topic in all country codebooks) out of the subcategories 'migrant workers' and 'immigration and refugees issues/rights'. Also, in order to be able to account for domestic views on the European integration process, and make this comparable to EU-level discussions of the same issues, a new topic – 'European institutional design' – was created, which corresponds to EU issues in the country data and a few subtopics in the European Council data – namely enlargement, EU institutions, treaties and relations between the EU and its Member States.
12. The two topics which obtained most attention on the Spanish agenda are governance issues and macroeconomics. This difference might be partially explained by the fact that the number of Spanish speeches included in the analysis is smaller.
13. Considering the bounded nature of our dependent variable, OLS regression cannot be used here. Beta regression is also not applicable as in it the dependent variable assumes values between 0 and 1, yet excluding 0 and 1. One alternative would be to do a truncated regression, which would allow us to systematically exclude observations below or above a certain threshold. However, this requires a normally distributed dependent variable – a condition which is not met by our data.
14. The only exception among the twelve cases is the second Spanish Presidency of 1995.
15. They also show how much change on the European Council agenda has been caused by the national agenda in interaction with the Presidency dummy. Yet, these effects are not significant.
16. We have also conducted the analysis on a slightly modified dataset, where we divided the attention to one of the most prominent topics – foreign affairs – into four subcategories: foreign aid and human rights; international terrorism; international economic development; and other foreign policy and international affairs issues. This increased the N of our sample and allowed for a more fine-grained distinction of the themes within a contestably wide policy theme. The overall results of the fractional logits are the same: we find no support for the Presidency impact thesis and significant individual impact of each of the national agendas on the European one. Small differences exist in the size of the marginal effects. Conducting the analysis in this modified form confirms the robustness of our findings.

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