

The Policy Impact of Rapporteurs in the European Parliament

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Abstract

This paper examines the policy impact of committee rapporteurs in the European Parliament (EP) in two respects. First, we examine the influence of committee rapporteurs on the EP's positions in legislative decision making. In particular, we focus on the positions of the Parliament relative to each of the member states in the Council of Ministers. Hypotheses are formulated on the impact of the nationality and party affiliations of rapporteurs. These are tested using a large dataset containing information on the policy positions of the Parliament and member states on 70 legislative proposals. We find that the EP's positions are significantly closer to the positions of the home member states of the rapporteurs. Second, we examine the impact of committee rapporteurs on the EP's bargaining success. In particular, we focus on the distance between the Parliament and final decision outcomes, controlling for the extremity of the Parliament's positions. Hypotheses are formulated on the impact of rapporteurs' party affiliations and general policy extremity, and tested using information from the same dataset. We find that the EP has more bargaining success in relation to the Council when its rapporteurs are relatively moderate.

Introduction

The procedures of parliamentary committees influence decision outcomes in legislatures by empowering certain actors over others, thereby inducing policy stability where voting cycles might otherwise occur. The extent of that influence and the conditions under which it takes place are, however, far from settled. McKelvey (1976) and Schofield's (1978) chaos theorems demonstrated that decision outcomes are inherently unstable when actors must agree on more than one issue, even when a simple-majority voting rule applies. Subsequently, institutional structures, including parliamentary committees, received new interest from political scientists. Shepsle and Weingast's (1987) analysis of the US Congress suggests that the committee system induces stability in policy outcomes by insulating controversial issues from each other, thus limiting possibilities for trade-offs and logrolling. One consequence of this is that parliamentarians may strive to be appointed to committees in areas in which they have special interests (Weingast and Marshall 1988). This could result in committees being composed of individuals whose policy preferences diverge from the median legislator. Depending on the power of the committee relative to the plenary (Tsebelis 2002: 101-2), such divergent preferences have a considerable impact on decision outcomes. A different approach to the study of parliamentary committees conceptualises committees as agents of the parliament as a whole (Gilligan and Krehbiel 1989; 1990). According to this view, the main function of committees is to provide non-committee members of parliament with reliable information before plenary votes. Committees can only fulfil this role effectively if they are broadly

* Rory Costello wishes to acknowledge funding he received from the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences while conducting research on this paper.

representative of the chamber as a whole: in other words, if they are “microcosms of the House” (Krehbiel 1991: 155). The implication of this view is that committees affect decision outcomes by compartmentalising decisions – thus inducing stability – but not by biasing decision outcomes from the preferences of the median legislator.

The present paper assesses the policy impact of one of the most important aspects of the committee procedures of the Parliament of the European Union: the allocation of committee reports to rapporteurs. Each legislative proposal is assigned to a committee member who subsequently drafts a report on the proposal. The rapporteur’s report contains a set of proposed amendments that are subsequently voted on by the committee and the plenary of the European Parliament (EP). The report approved in the plenary then becomes the EP’s opinion that is transmitted to the Council of Ministers. The rapporteur also plays a key role in the inter-institutional negotiations that take place between the European Parliament, the Council of Ministers and the European Commission.

Existing research on rapporteurs in the EP focuses on the allocation of reports to different committee members. Kaeding (2004) examines report allocation in the Environment Committee in order to assess the theories of legislative organisation mentioned above. His findings are mixed. On one hand, MEPs associated with environmental interest groups receive a disproportionate number of reports, suggesting that rapporteurs are preference outliers. On the other hand, more experienced MEPs are also overrepresented, indicating that rapporteurs facilitate the provision of reliable information. Benedetto (2005) examines the proportionality of report allocation, and finds a high degree of correlation between EP party size and the number of reports received. Hoyland (2006a), meanwhile, uses data on report allocation to test hypotheses regarding inter-institutional negotiations. He finds that MEPs from governing national parties receive more reports than MEPs from opposition parties. This, he argues, is because it is easier for these MEPs to obtain information regarding the policy alternatives that are acceptable to member states in the Council, thus placing the EP in a better bargaining position.

While these studies indicate the possible motivations underlying the allocation of committee reports, they do not tell us whether or not the choice of rapporteur actually matters in terms of policy outcomes. The main contribution of the present paper is to examine the policy impact of the allocation of committee reports. We examine policy impact in two ways. First, we examine whether the EP’s opinions on the controversial issues raised by legislative proposals are influenced by the nationalities and party affiliations of the rapporteurs who write the reports on the proposals. The focus of this first analysis is the position of the Parliament relative to the position of each of the member states in the Council of Ministers. Second, we examine whether the EP’s bargaining success is influenced by the characteristics of the rapporteur. The focus of this second analysis is the distance between the Parliament’s opinion and the final text of the legislation that is adopted. Here, we control for the extremity of the EP’s opinion, so as not to conflate EP influence with luck. The next section describes the role of the rapporteur, and formulates several hypotheses to explain variation in the two dependent variables in our study: first, the relative distance between the EP and different member states’ positions and, second, the EP’s bargaining success. As described in the third section, these hypotheses are tested using a large dataset. The dataset contains information on the decision outcomes favoured by the member states and the EP on the controversial issues raised by 70 legislative proposals in the period 1996-2002, in the EU of fifteen member states.

The role and influence of the rapporteur

Rapporteurs have two primary duties: to assist the Parliament in forming a position on a legislative proposal, and to represent the Parliament in negotiations with the Council. In relation to the first task, the rapporteur must draw up a report on the Commission proposal. Following a series of discussions with the committee as a whole, the rapporteur produces a text that usually includes a list of suggested amendments. This report is then voted on by the committee, before being submitted to plenary. The rapporteur also plays an important part in the plenary debate that precedes the final vote, and can offer his or her opinion on any additional amendments suggested on the floor (Corbett et al. 2003: 119-120).

The second task of the rapporteur only applies under the codecision procedure, when the EP is an equal co-legislator with the Council. Under this procedure, differences between the institutions must be resolved before legislation is adopted. Negotiations between the institutions can take place at various stages of the legislative process. Informal meetings known as 'trialogues' can take place from an early stage, and the rapporteur is always a member of the small parliamentary delegation. Indeed, in these early-agreement meetings the rapporteurs are often believed to have 'quite extraordinary latitude to set the agenda of negotiations' (Farrell and Heritier, 2004: 1200). If disagreements remain between the Council and Parliament after the second reading, then formal 'conciliation committees' are organised. Rapporteurs also play a central role in the conciliation committees, but are accompanied by a large team of negotiators that is representative of the political composition of the Parliament as a whole (European Parliament, 2004).

Given the importance of the position, a number of questions arise regarding the influence of rapporteurs. First, to what extent and in what way do rapporteurs influence the position taken by the Parliament? Second, does the choice of rapporteur have implications for the success of the Parliament in the inter-institutional negotiations? Providing answers to these questions is important in terms of building a comprehensive picture of the EU legislative process.

The influence of rapporteurs on the EP's opinions

In this section we develop a number of hypotheses regarding the influence of the rapporteur on the positions taken by the EP relative to the member states. These hypotheses are based on a series of assumptions regarding the preferences of rapporteurs and the institutional constraints on their ability to pursue these preferences.

Firstly, there are reasons to expect that rapporteurs' preferences will be related to the preferences of their home member state government. While the electoral connection for MEPs is weak, they nevertheless share constituents with their national government and are likely to be targeted by the same national lobbyists. Also, many governments are in close contact with all MEPs from their member state, regardless of party affiliation, conducting regular high-level meetings and providing written briefings on current issues (Corbett et al. 2003: 280). These contacts are likely to be exploited to a much greater degree by governments when an MEP from their country is acting as rapporteur. Our interviews with officials from member states' permanent representations indicate that rapporteurs are in close contact with their national

government¹. For these reasons, we expect rapporteurs to pursue policy positions that are close to the policy position of their home member state in the Council.

Hypothesis 1: The Parliament's policy positions are more congruent with the policy positions of the rapporteur's home member state than with other policy positions.

National party affiliation is another factor that must be taken into account. As the powers of the parliament have grown, national parties have placed greater emphasis on monitoring and controlling the actions of their MEPs (Raunio 2000). MEPs have strong incentives to pursue the interests of their national party, who control candidate selection in the European elections. As Hug (2003: 51) points out, 'if principals can appoint an agent, then the agent's preferences should be related with the principal's preferences'. Rapporteurs from national parties that are in government (and consequently represented in the Council) therefore have more reason to align themselves with their home member state than MEPs from opposition parties.

Hypothesis 2: The Parliament's policy positions are more congruent with the policy positions of the rapporteur's home member state than with other policy positions, if the rapporteur is a member of a governing national party.

Our third hypothesis relates to EP party membership. Competition within the Parliament is structured around EP rather than national parties. Research on roll-call voting has shown that EP party group cohesion is strong, and these party groups compete largely on the traditional left-right dimension (Hix et al 2005). This has led many commentators to the conclusion that ideology is more important than nationality or national party membership in shaping MEP behaviour (e.g. Noury 2002). In addition to ideological affiliation, another reason why MEPs are expected to pursue the interests of their EP party is that they depend on them for promotion within the Parliament (Hix 1999: 76). Rapporteurs know that if they do not perform to the satisfaction of their EP party leadership, they are unlikely to receive another report, or to climb the party ranks. Therefore, there is reason to expect that rapporteurs' preferences will be related to the ideological position of their party group.

Hypothesis 3: The distance between the Parliament's positions and the positions of other actors depends on the ideological distance between the rapporteurs' EP party group and those actors.

The rapporteur's ability to influence the Parliament's position is subject to a number of constraints. The most direct constraint on the rapporteur is that the report must be acceptable to a majority in the committee and in the plenary. There is also pressure on the rapporteur to reach as broad a consensus as possible in the committee and the plenary (Corbett et al. 2003: 119; Benedetto 2005). As Hoyland (2006b) argues, "it is both common and expected that the rapporteur takes the views of the other members into account when drawing up the committee position". Evidence from case studies suggests that these constraints are greater on more important issues, where other MEPs are more likely to challenge the rapporteur's position (Benedetto 2005: 72). Other MEPs are more likely to challenge the rapporteur's position when the impact of a successful challenge matters more in terms of the decision outcome.

¹ Interviews, Brussels, July 2006.

Obviously, the EP's opinion has more impact on decision outcomes when the codecision procedure applies than when the consultation procedure applies. In other words, when the consultation procedure applies, we expect rapporteurs to be given more leeway to impress their own positions on the EP's opinion.

Hypothesis 4: Rapporteurs have more influence on the EP's opinions under the consultation procedure than under the codecision procedure.

The ease with which rapporteurs secure support for their position also depends on their access to other MEPs. Rapporteurs from the large party groups (the EPP and the PES) enjoy such access to other MEPs. They may also be able to call on a considerable degree of support for their reports as a result of party loyalty.

Hypothesis 5: Rapporteurs from large party groupings have more influence on the EP's opinions than rapporteurs from small party groupings.

A related, but conceptually distinct consideration concerns the impact of whether or not the rapporteur holds extreme preferences. Rapporteurs with extreme preferences may not receive the trust of other MEPs. Trust is an essential part of the rapporteur's influence, because the content of reports is often highly technical, forcing MEPs to vote on issues that they know little about (Whitaker 2005). Trust is also expected to be an important factor in determining whether or not rapporteurs' attempts to influence other MEPs are successful. Our expectation is that rapporteurs with extreme preferences relative to the median legislator will generally be less successful in influencing other MEPs, and therefore the EP's opinion.

Hypothesis 6: Rapporteurs with preferences close to the median legislator have more influence on the EP's opinions than do rapporteurs with extreme preferences.

The influence of rapporteurs on the EP's bargaining success

The characteristics of the rapporteur may also influence the Parliament's bargaining success. As mentioned above, the rapporteur plays a key role in the inter-institutional negotiations that take place in the codecision procedure. We therefore expect the characteristics of the rapporteur to influence the EP's bargaining success on legislative proposals subject to the codecision procedure, but not those subject to consultation.

The first rapporteur characteristic that may influence the EP's bargaining success is whether the rapporteur is affiliated with a governing party at the national level. Benedetto (2005) argues that Parliament is at a disadvantage in the inter-institutional negotiations under codecision due to an information deficit: the Council always knows what has gone on in the Parliament, but the Council's own internal meetings are held in secret. However, when the rapporteur has well-developed contacts in the Council, 'privileged hints' may be available regarding the preferences of the various member states. Hoyland (2006a) suggests that it is rapporteurs from governing parties that are in the best position to obtain such information, and finds that MEPs from such parties tend to receive more reports. We therefore expect that these rapporteurs can exploit their contacts in the Council to the Parliament's advantage.

Hypothesis 7: *The Parliament is more successful when the rapporteur is a member of a national party represented in the Council at the time of negotiations.*

The level of support that the rapporteur can draw on in the Parliament is also likely to affect the bargaining position of the EP. In the context of US conference committees, it has been observed that the delegates from the Senate are in a stronger position because they ‘draw more directly and more completely upon the support of their parent chamber’ (Fenno 1966, quoted in Longley and Oleszek 1989: 79). The argument is that the close relationship between the delegation and the parent chamber ensures strong external support for the negotiators. Similarly, it is claimed that rapporteurs who can rely on networks of support in the Parliament are stronger negotiators, as their counterparts in the Council know that they can back up their position with votes in plenary (Farrell and Heritier 2004: 1200). One factor that is likely to affect the level of external support for rapporteurs in negotiations is party membership: rapporteurs from the large party groups, the EPP and PES, have access to a large support base.

Hypothesis 8: *The Parliament is more successful when the rapporteur is from a large party group.*

A second factor that might affect the level of external support for rapporteurs in negotiations is their proximity to the median legislator in the Parliament. Rapporteurs who are preference outliers will not be in a position to provide a guarantee to Council negotiators that they will receive the full backing of the parliament for any deals reached. Furthermore, if a rapporteur is unable to bring her preference to bear on the position of the EP, she may use the negotiation stage to rectify this. As Shepsle and Weingast (1987) argue, legislators who engage in inter-cameral negotiations have ‘ex post adjustment power’ by which they manipulate the decision outcome in their favour. Assuming that the EP position reflects the preference of the median legislator, rapporteurs whose preferences are furthest from the median legislator are most likely to defect from this position in negotiations.

Hypothesis 9: *The Parliament is more successful when the rapporteur’s preference is closer to the median legislator.*

Data and Measurement

The information used to test the hypotheses refers to 174 controversial issues from 70 legislative proposals introduced by the European Commission between the first half of 1996 and the second half of 2000. More details on the case selection decisions and data collection procedures are provided by Stokman and Thomson (2004), Thomson et al. (2004) and Thomson et al. eds. (2006). The legislative proposals were selected according to the following three criteria. Each was on the Council’s agenda in the years 1999 and/or 2000, was mentioned in *Agence Europe*, a news service covering European affairs, and each gave rise to at least one controversial issue. The proposals cover a wide range of policy areas, and include proposals subject to both the codecision and consultation procedures.

Each of the controversial issues was represented spatially, in the form of a policy scale ranging from 0 to 100. The decision outcomes favoured most by the European Commission, each of the fifteen member states and the European

Parliament were estimated using interviews with key informants from the Commission and member states' representations to the EU, and documentation. These positions referred to the decision outcomes favoured most by each of the actors at the time of the introduction of the Commission's proposal, or as soon as they took a position on the issue. The EP's positions were based on the EP's opinions issued during the legislative process. For each issue, the most extreme decision outcomes are located at the ends of the policy scale, at positions 0 and 100. Actors with other positions were placed between these extremes by the key informants to represent their views of the political distances between their positions and each of the extremes.

An example of this way of representing controversies is given in Figure 1. The example is taken from a controversial issue raised by a proposal introduced in 1996 on cocoa and chocolate products intended for human consumption (COD/1996/112), the chocolate directive. The proposal aimed to introduce common standards for chocolate products, including fat content and labelling. One of the controversial issues raised by this proposal was the dichotomous issue of whether or not the UK and Ireland should be allowed to authorize the use on their territories of the name 'milk chocolate' to designate 'milk chocolate with high milk content'. This seemingly innocuous issue was a point of considerable disagreement within the Council and between the EP and the Council. It concerned the production of so-called dairy milk chocolate, in particular Cadbury's dairy milk, which contains higher milk content than regular chocolate. One key informant described it as absolutely essential that the British negotiators returned to London with this derogation. Without it, this popular British chocolate would disappear from the supermarket shelves, presumably along with vocal protests from tabloid newspapers against unwarranted interventions from Brussels. Since there are only two alternatives on this issue, these were coded as positions 0 and 100 on the policy scale. Position 0 is used to represent support for a continuation of the derogation. Position 100 is used to represent support for the abolition of the derogation. Other issues in the dataset represent a range of alternatives between positions 0 and 100, such as the amount of money to be spent on a particular programme, or the strength of the health warning on tobacco products.

<Figure 1 here>

Validity and reliability tests were conducted on the informants' judgments with satisfactory results. These tests consisted of comparing informants' judgments with information from Council documentation, and comparing judgments from different informants (Thomson, 2006). These tests show that of all the points of discussion raised in the Council, key informants generally focus on issues that are more controversial, and that are more difficult to resolve. These are exactly the kinds of issues most relevant to exploring variation in the level of agreement between the EP and different member states, because they are cases in which member states disagree with each other. Informants' estimates of member states' policy preferences sometimes differ from information reported in Council documentation. On examination, these differences are due to the fact that Council documents do not refer to policy preferences, but to the decision outcomes actors were prepared to accept during the course of the negotiations. In addition, König et al. (forthcoming) compared thirty-one point estimates provided by these key informants' with estimates from informants in the European Parliament and found that thirty match perfectly or almost perfectly.

Analysing the Parliament's positions relative to different member states

Our first set of analyses concern the position of the EP relative to the positions of member states. The dependent variable in those first analyses is the absolute distance between the European Parliament and each member state's position on each of the issues. The unit of analysis is therefore the EP-member state dyad on each issue. In the example in Figure 1, the EP's position is 100 on the policy scale; it favoured the abolition of the derogation for the UK and Ireland. Since the Belgian government's position is also 100, the case for the EP-Belgium dyad on this issue has a value of 0 on the dependent variable. Since the UK government's position is 0, the case for the EP-UK dyad has a value of 100 on the dependent variable.

The first hypothesis is that the policy positions of the EP are congruent with the policy positions of the rapporteur's home member state. If the hypothesis is true, then the distance between any given state and the EP will be related to the distance between that state and the rapporteur's home state. We therefore calculate the variable "Member state distance to home member state". This variable measures the distance between the position of the member state referred to in the case and the position of the home member state of the EP rapporteur. In the example referred to in Figure 1, the EP rapporteur was Belgian, Paul Lannoye (Green), in the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Consumer Protection. Because the EP and Belgium hold the same position on this issue, there is a perfect linear correlation between the distances from states' positions to the Belgian position ("Member state distance to home member state"), and the distances from states' positions to the EP's position (the dependent variable). The case referring to the member state that was the rapporteur's home member state has a value of zero on the variable "Member state distance to home member state", as do cases for other states that share the home member state's position.

Some of our other hypotheses imply the presence of significant interaction effects. The second hypothesis, for instance, implies that the effect of "Member state distance to home member state" is stronger when the rapporteur is affiliated with a governing party at the national level.

The third hypothesis relates to the ideological distance between the rapporteur's EP party and the member state governments. This was calculated using data from Benoit and Laver's (2006) expert survey of national party positions, and McElroy and Benoit's (2006) expert survey of EP party positions. Both surveys were carried out between 2003-2004, using the same dimensions and scales. We include scores for the main economic dimension ('taxes versus spending'), which has been found to be the main dimension of conflict in the EP (to date, there is no strong evidence regarding what dimension, if any, captures the contest within the Council). As many member states have coalition governments, their ideological position was calculated as the mean score for all the coalition parties.

To measure the extremity of each individual rapporteur, we calculated their distance from the median legislator in the Parliament², using the first dimension of the NOMINATE scores (see Hix et al. 2005). This dimension relates to the traditional left-right divide, and is the main dimension of conflict in the Parliament (Hix et al. 2005).

² Our dataset covers both the 4th and 5th Parliamentary terms. The rapporteurs' extremity is based on their distance from the median legislator in the relevant Parliamentary term, determined by the date of the EP's first reading.

The operationalisation of the other variables referred to in the hypotheses is self-explanatory. For instance, we ascertained whether the rapporteurs were affiliated with governing parties in their home member states, and whether they were affiliated with one of the big European parliamentary groupings, the EPP or the PES.

In addition, the control variable “Average distance between EP and other states’ positions” is also included in the analyses of the positioning of the Parliament relative to different member states. For each case, this variable contains the average absolute distance between the EP and the member states not referred to in the case, of the states that took positions on the issue. This variable controls for the fact that the distance between the EP and any given state’s position is highly correlated with the general extremity of the EP’s position. The variable does not introduce endogeneity into the model because it excludes information on the distance between the Parliament’s position and the position of the member state referred to in the case. Inclusion of this variable as a control variable facilitates the comparison of issues on which there are very different alignments of actors. Figure 1, for instance, refers to an issue on which the EP took a position at one end-point of the policy scale, while the positions of the member states were concentrated on the two alternatives. On some other issues, the Parliament took a position at the centre of the policy scale (e.g. at position 50), while the member states’ positions were distributed more evenly over a range of positions along the scale.

This unit of analysis raises the issue of dependencies between the cases. In the above example, the distance between the EP and Belgium’s position is not independent of the distance between the EP and the UK’s position. We therefore apply OLS regression with robust standard errors clustered at the level of each of the issues in the dataset. Another coding decision concerns indifferent actors. Although most member states took positions on most of these controversies, some were indifferent. For instance, Austria and Luxembourg seldom take positions on fisheries policy. Such EP-member state dyads were simply dropped from the analyses.

Analysing the EP’s bargaining success

In the second set of analyses we examine the EP’s bargaining success using the same dataset. The cases consist of the 128 issues on which the Parliament took a position. We examine the 61 issues subject to codecision separately from the 67 issues subject to consultation. Recall that we expect the characteristics of the rapporteurs to influence the EP’s bargaining success only when the codecision rule applies. In these analyses the dependent variable is the distance between the EP’s position and the decision outcome. Therefore, when the decision outcome is fully in line with the EP’s position, the dependent variable has a value of 0. When the outcome is further from the EP’s position, the dependent variable has a higher value. In the example in Figure 1, the dependent variable has a value of 100, because the derogation for the UK and Ireland was continued (position 0), rather than abolishing it as the EP had called for (position 100). This case is in line with our hypotheses because the Belgian rapporteur, MEP Paul Lannoye, was not affiliated with one of the parties in government in Belgium at the time, he was from a small party group (the Greens), and had a relatively extreme position.

In this second set of analyses it is also essential to control for the extremity of the EP’s position relative to the other actors involved in legislative decision making. If the EP’s position is a moderate one, close to the centre of the distribution of other actors’ positions, it is likely to be close to the decision outcome. This, however, does

not indicate whether or not the EP influenced the decision outcome. This of course refers to the ubiquitous distinction between power and luck (Barry 1970). Likewise, if the Parliament's position is an extreme one and the decision outcome also lies far from its position, this does not necessarily imply that the EP did not influence the decision outcome. If the EP had not taken such an extreme position, the outcome might still have been substantially different. To control for the extremity of the EP's position relative to that of other actors, we use the distance between the EP's position and the weighted average of the actors' policy positions. The weights assigned to the actors are the actors capabilities multiplied by the level of importance they attach to the issue in question. Actors' capabilities are measured using their Shapley-Shubik scores. This weighted average is the so-called compromise model, which Achen (2006) demonstrates is a first-order approximation of the Nash Bargaining Solution. In the present analyses, we use this well-known solution as a method of controlling for the EP's policy extremity.

Analysis

Distances between the EP and member states' positions

For the first analysis, we estimate two models separately for the issues subject to consultation and codecision. Model I includes all the variables discussed in the previous section, excluding the interaction terms; Model II includes the same variables plus the interaction terms. The results are presented in Table 1.

In line with the first hypothesis, we find that the rapporteur's nationality has a significant impact on the EP's position relative to the positions of member states. However, this impact is only observable on issues subject to the consultation procedure, which is consistent with the fourth hypothesis. In model I, we find that the independent variable, 'Member state distance to home member state', is positive and significant for the consultation cases. The coefficient can be interpreted as follows: controlling for other factors, an increase of one unit in the distance between a member state's position and the position of the rapporteur's home state is associated with an increase of 0.34 in the distance between the EP and that member state's position. The coefficient for this variable for the codecision cases is not statistically significant.

<Table 1 here>

Another variable concerns the ideological distance between the rapporteur's EP party and the member state government. While the coefficient is positive, it is not statistically distinguishable from zero. Therefore, we have no evidence to support the third hypothesis.

Model II tests whether the degree of congruence between the EP and the rapporteur's home member state is affected by the presence of certain conditions, such as when the rapporteur is a member of a governing party, a member of a large EP party, or a preference outlier. A positive coefficient on the interaction term implies that the effect is greater when the condition is present; a negative coefficient implies that opposite. However, none of the interaction terms are significant; so we find no support for hypotheses 2, 5 or 6.

The EP's bargaining success

Table 2 presents the results of a regression analysis of the distance between the EP's position and the decision outcome. There are three independent variables relating to hypotheses 7-9: 'government party rapporteur', 'rapporteur from EPP or PES', and 'rapporteur extremity'. There is also a control variable, 'extremity of the EP'. While the hypotheses being tested refer to the codecision procedure only, we include the results of the same model for the Consultation cases by way of comparison.

<Table 2 here>

Of our three hypotheses, we find strong support for hypothesis 9. Rapporteurs with moderate preferences are associated with decision outcomes relatively close to the EP's opinions. The coefficient for this variable can be interpreted as follows. When the extremity of the rapporteur increases from 0 to 1 (representing almost the entire extremity scale: see Figure 2), the model predicts an increase in the distance between the EP's position and the final decision outcome of 37 points. In line with our expectations, this relationship only holds for the issues subject to the codecision procedure.

Figure 2 shows that there is a substantial amount of variation in the extremity of the rapporteurs preferences, as measured by their NOMINATE scores, based on roll-call voting (Hix et al. 2005). Unsurprisingly, rapporteurs from the large party groupings, the EPP and the PES, have relatively moderate positions, but so too do the rapporteurs from the smaller liberal grouping, the ELDR. We find no significant effect associated with the dichotomous variable indicating whether or not the rapporteur was from one of the two large party groupings. Even when excluding the variable referring to the extremity of the rapporteur, this dichotomous variable is not significant. We therefore find no support for the eighth hypothesis, that the EP is more successful when the rapporteur is from a large party grouping.

<Figure 2 here>

Similarly, we find no support for the seventh hypothesis, that the EP is more successful when the rapporteur is affiliated with a governing party at the national level. The control variable 'extremity of EP position' is positive and significant under both procedures. This is as to be expected: the more extreme the EP position relative to the member states' positions, the further it is likely to be from the decision outcome.

Conclusion

The first of the two main findings is that rapporteurs have a significant impact on the content of the EP's opinions on issues subject to consultation, but not on issues subject to codecision. Given that the EP only gives opinions under the consultation procedure, and that these opinions can be disregarded by the Council, what is the substantive importance of rapporteurs' influence? The short answer is "substantial". Thomson and Hosli (2006) demonstrate that decision outcomes taken under the consultation rule, combined with qualified majority voting in the Council, can be predicted most accurately with a model that attributes some weight to the European Parliament. In the model that generates the most accurate predictions of decision

outcomes, the EP has a weight roughly equal to that of a large member state in the Council. Further, Thomson and Hosli (2006) also report that key informants attribute considerable influence to the EP under the consultation procedure. While there is strong evidence that the EP's opinions under consultation matter, we have little more than anecdotes about the mechanisms through which the EP exerts that influence. Some key informants suggest that the EP's opinions under the consultation procedure are brought forward by the Commission representatives in the Council meetings (*ibid.*). It is clear that whatever mechanisms lie behind the EP's influence on final decision outcomes under consultation, these are based on informal norms, rather than formal procedures.

Rapporteurs have the following significant impact on the content of the EP's opinions relative to member states' positions on issues subject to consultation. The EP's opinions are significantly closer to the positions of the home member states of the rapporteurs than to other positions. Of the rapporteur characteristics we examined, nationality is the only one associated with a significant effect. We found no significant effects associated with rapporteurs' party affiliations, individual policy extremity, or their European parties' ideological distances to their member states' governments. This finding contrasts with, although does not contradict, evidence that trans-national party groupings structure MEPs' behaviour, and that the left-right dimension is a strong predictor of their behaviour (Hix et al. 2005). The evidence on the importance of trans-national party groupings and the left-right dimension is based on roll-call votes. While roll-call votes are certainly worthy of serious research attention, they are an overtly public display of behaviour. Consistent failure to follow the party line in roll-call votes is likely to have negative consequences for an MEP in terms of career advancement within the EP. By contrast, given the complexity of many legislative proposals, MEPs have a considerable degree of autonomy from their EP party leadership when acting as rapporteurs. Such autonomy may lead rapporteurs to be receptive to other sources of potential influence, notably from national actors. We know from descriptive research that many governments keep close contact with their MEPs, holding regular high-level meetings with them, regardless of their party affiliation (Corbett et al. 2003: 280).

The findings do not necessarily imply that rapporteurs' ideological positions or the ideological positions of rapporteurs' EP parties have no effects on the EP's opinions. We examined the positioning of the EP's opinions relative to the positions of the member states in the Council. The findings therefore depend partly on the dimensions that structure actor alignments in the Council. Previous research demonstrates that the left-right dimension does not structure actor alignments in the Council (Thomson et al. 2004). National governments' positions on the left-right dimension correspond to their positions on the specific issues considered in the present study in only a fraction of the cases examined here (*ibid.*). Therefore, future research should re-examine the influence of rapporteurs' ideological positions using alternative ways of measuring the EP's positions.

Our findings on the impact of rapporteurs on the content of the EP's opinions also relate to the broad conceptualisations of committee procedures referred to in the opening paragraph. Weingast and Marshall (1988) conceive of committees as arenas that attract parliamentarians seeking special interests. By contrast, Gilligan and Krehbiel (1989; 1990) view committees as agents of the parliament as a whole. According to this principal-agent conception, committees' main function is to provide non-committee members with reliable information. These alternative views lead to different expectations regarding the composition of committees: the first view implies

that committees are composed of parliamentarians who are preference outliers, while the second view implies that committees are representative of all parliamentarians. On the basis of a comprehensive empirical study of committee membership in the EP, McElroy concludes that “although committee members do tend to possess policy-specific expertise, committees are, nonetheless, highly representative of the EP as a whole, in terms of both party and policy representation” (2006: 5). Despite the apparent representativeness of committees in the EP, our findings show that rapporteurs have more than a purely informational function. However, rapporteurs’ influence is found only on issues subject to consultation with the EP, not on issues subject to codecision. A likely explanation for this is that rapporteurs have more autonomy from other committee members and MEPs when drafting the EP’s opinions on legislative proposals subject to consultation.

The second of the two main findings is that rapporteurs have significant impact on the EP’s bargaining success. This is consistent with Farrell and Héritier’s (2004) analysis of inter-organisational negotiation in the EU. They point to the importance of relais actors in the Council and the EP, notably the Council presidency and the EP rapporteur. These actors play a “gatekeeping” function by controlling the flow of information (ibid.: 1188). Farrell and Héritier’s analysis focuses on so-called early-agreements under the codecision procedure. These are legislative proposals adopted after the first parliamentary reading, before which a series of informal meetings are held with representatives of the Commission, the Council and the Parliament. Our findings suggest that rapporteurs affect the EP’s bargaining success in a broad range of legislative proposals subject to the codecision procedure, not only those resolved after the first reading. Specifically, we find that rapporteurs with ideological positions close to the median parliamentarian are associated with final decision outcomes close to the EP’s opinion. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, to play their role effectively, relais actors must be trusted by the actors from the organisations they represent. Such trust enables relais actors to negotiate effectively, for example enabling them to obtain support within their organisations for the decision outcomes they agreed to with other negotiators. Relais actors with moderate positions, rapporteurs whose ideological positions are close to the parliamentary median, are likely to enjoy such trust more than extreme actors. Secondly, given that rapporteurs have little influence on the EP’s position under codecision, rapporteurs with preferences far from the EP median may use the negotiations to regain some of this influence, and defect from the position agreed on in the parliament.

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Figures and tables

Should the UK and Ireland be allowed to authorise the sale of dairy milk chocolate?

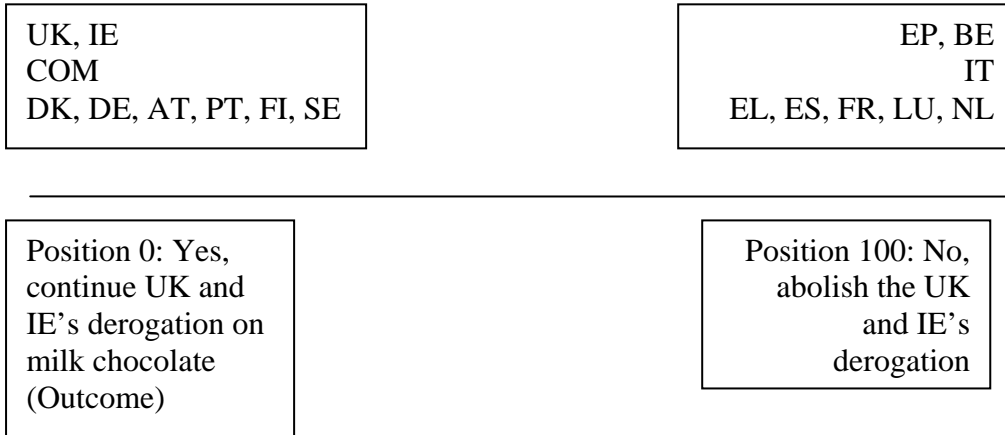


Figure 1. One of the controversies from the chocolate directive

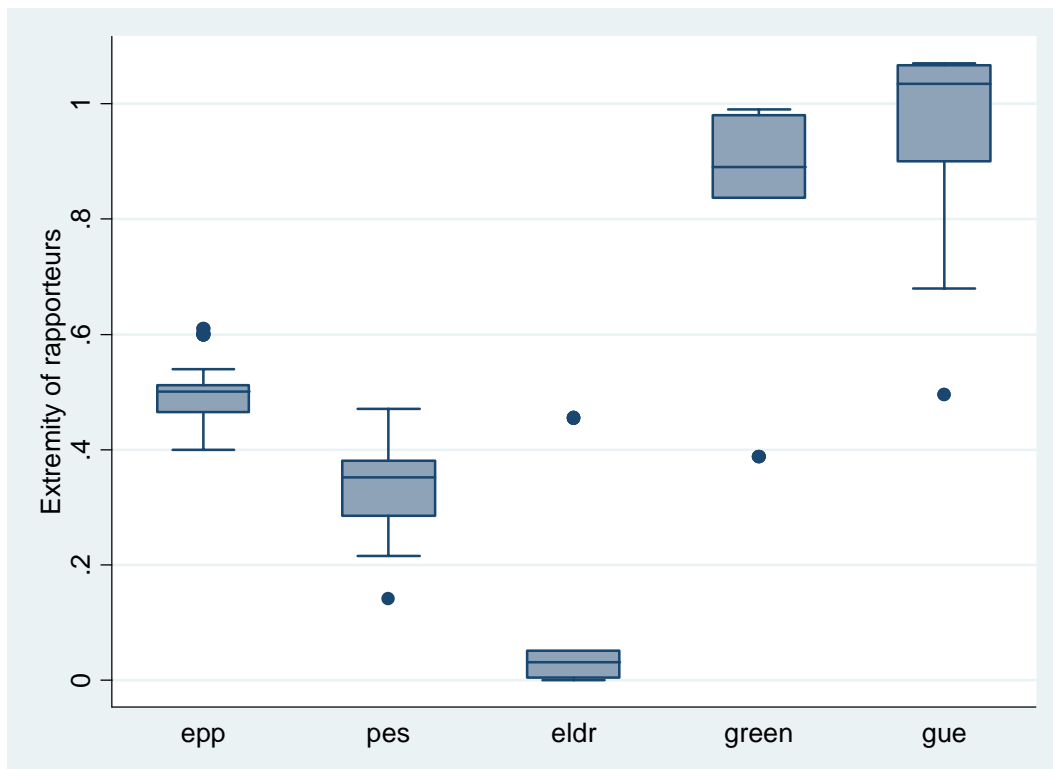


Figure 2. Extremity of rapporteurs, by EP party

Table 1. Regression analyses of distance between EP and member states' positions (robust standard errors in parentheses)

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Consultation	Codecision	Consultation	Codecision
Member state distance to home member state	0.35*** (0.11)	0.05 (0.12)	0.61*** (0.22)	0.02 (0.38)
Rapporteur member of governing party	-4.76** (2.14)	0.73 (1.39)	-5.82 (5.84)	-3.35 (8.14)
Rapporteur member of EPP or PES	0.23 (1.59)	1.80 (1.03)	5.96 (4.69)	11.39 (8.79)
Extremity of rapporteur	-0.37 (2.56)	1.09 (1.98)	2.76 (6.67)	-5.92 (13.2)
Ideological distance between rapporteur's EP party and member state	0.22 (0.26)	-0.11 (0.34)	0.13 (0.24)	-0.06 (0.34)
Average distance between EP and member states	0.93*** (0.04)	0.86*** (0.03)	0.91*** (0.04)	0.83*** (0.05)
Member state distance to home member state * rapporteur member of governing party			0.02 (0.20)	0.09 (0.24)
Member state distance to home member state * rapporteur member of EPP or PES			-0.27 (0.18)	-0.27 (0.25)
Member state distance to home member state * extremity of rapporteur			-0.20 (0.31)	0.27 (0.50)
Constant	-4.38 (2.93)	3.16 (5.73)	-8.60* (5.06)	4.79 (10.65)
R ²	0.55	0.28	0.56	0.30
N	950	908	950	908

Note: *p<0.10; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. OLS regression estimates with robust standard errors, clustered by issue.

Table 2. Regression analysis of distance between the EP position and the outcome

Independent variables	Consultation	Codecision
Government party rapporteur	-0.63 (7.87)	-9.98 (10.08)
Rapporteur from EPP or PES	-6.68 (8.77)	9.26 (10.20)
Rapporteur extremity	1.71 (14.23)	38.29*** (13.23)
Extremity of EP position	0.85*** (0.09)	0.83*** (0.15)
Constant	10.27 (9.46)	-7.96 (10.39)
n	67	61
R ²	0.42	0.31

Note: *p<0.10; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. OLS regression estimates with robust standard errors, clustered at the level of the proposals to which the issues relate.