

**Technocrats or Democrats? Understanding the
Democratic Orientations of European Commission Officials¹**

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Introduction

Unelected officials play a vital but potentially perverse role in the political life of advanced democracies. Although they lack direct democratic legitimacy of their own, through their interactions with politicians and organized interests in the planning of services to their dealings with the general public in the delivery of services, public bureaucrats can decisively influence the direction and form that policy takes (see, e.g. Aberbach and Rockman 1988, Dogan 1975, Dunn 1999, Egeborg 1995, Epstein and O'Halloran 2000, Lipsky 1980, Suleiman 1984). Nowhere perhaps is the imprint of the unelected more likely (and the concomitant democratic risks greatest) than in policy making at the level of the European Union (EU). Here, the European Commission (the Commission)—in many ways an unelected bureaucracy *par excellence*—formally enjoys significant programmatic, budgetary, supervisory, and regulatory responsibilities and, unlike national-level public administrations, is the sole initiator of EU legislation in most areas of social and economic policy. Despite a recent upturn in scholarly interest in the attitudes and behavior of permanent and seconded Commission officials (see, e.g., Christiansen 1997, Christoph 1993, Egeberg 1996, Hooghe 2001, 2006, Trondal 2006, 2007; earlier work includes Coombes 1970, Michelmann 1978), very little is still known about the democratic orientations of Commission bureaucrats. Using an original data set based on information gathered from almost 200 interviews with permanent Commission officials, we work towards addressing this gap in the literature.

The aims of the project for which this memo has been prepared are threefold. First, to present a theoretical assessment of how the Council of the European Union (the Council), the European Parliament (the Parliament), and organized interests serve as democratic anchors for the unelected officials of the Commission. Second, to describe both the actual ways in which Commission officials are democratically anchored through their interactions with the Council, Parliament, and interest groups, as well as Commission officials' attitudes towards the Council, Parliament, and interest groups as democratic anchors. Third, to investigate the extent to which personal values and institutional context influence officials' behavioral and attitudinal orientations towards these three democratic anchors. In terms of personal values and beliefs, we focus on officials' preferences for supranationalism as an organizing principle of European integration. We also consider the extent to which placing respondents in particular policy-specific contexts according to a set of institutional and structural variables helps explain variation in their attitudes and behaviour towards the Council, Parliament, and civil society.

¹ This is a work in progress. Please do not cite. We welcome feedback, which can be sent to Quinton Mayne at qmayne@princeton.edu.

Data

We collected our survey data based on a systematic selection process. Our primary interest was in gathering information on the self-reported attitudes and behavior of senior officials working in all 21 directorates-general (DGs) dealing with the full range of key policy areas handled by the Barroso Commission, as well as the most important extant DGs dealing with general and internal services.² We were also interested in meeting with senior officials working in the Commission's special services and units. Of the 12 special services and units that existed at the time of our interviews in Brussels, we focused our attention on arguably the three most important: the Secretariat General, the EuropeAid Co-operation Office, and the European Anti-Fraud Office.³ In order to gain a fuller understanding of the Commission, we were also interested in ascertaining the attitudes and behavior of mid-level Commission officials, namely heads of unit. In view of the large number of heads of unit working in the Commission, we opted for a convenience sample, concentrating on four DGs and one special service in which we had secured interviews with a sizeable proportion of senior officials. In the end, we also interviewed one or two heads of unit in a further 11 DGs and 3 special services. (For the sake of simplicity, in this paper we use the term DG to refer to special services as well as directorate-generals.)

In the end, we contacted 241 senior officials from 24 DGs and 4 special services (see Table 1.), including 28 directors-general, 22 deputy directors-general, and 191 directors. Between March and December 2005, we carried out semi-structured interviews with 134 of these senior officials, resulting in an overall response rate of 55%. More specifically, we interviewed 19 directors-general (response rate of 68%), 13 deputy directors-general (response rate of 59%), from 15 of the 20 DGs and the one special service that had deputy directors-general at the time of our interviews, and 102 directors (response rate of 53%) from 23 different DGs and two special services. In addition, we interviewed 59 mid-level officials from 16 DGs and four special services, though 38 (or 64%) of them worked in just four DGs and one special service.

Our final sample is representative as judged by the distribution of respondents across small and large DGs and by the nationality of respondents. The average response rate for directors in the DGs and one special service with seven or more directors (N=130) was 53%, while the average response rate for directors in the DGs and special services with six or fewer directors (N=61) was 54%. According to official figures published just after the completion of our interviews in early 2006, 56.4% of permanent senior officials (grades A14 to A16, or 59% of permanent senior officials of grade A15 and A16) came from either France, Germany, Italy, Spain, or the United Kingdom. In our sample, 56.0% of the senior officials we interviewed (N=75) came from these five countries. Our sample is also representative in terms of the proportion of Belgian senior officials. According to the figures published in early 2006, 10.6% of permanent senior officials (grades A14 to A16, or 8.6% of permanent senior officials of grade A15 and A16) were from Belgium; in our sample, 10.4% of the senior officials we interviewed (N=14) were Belgian.

² The 21 Directorates-General dealing with "policy" and "external relations" include: DG TRADE, DG RELEX, DG ECFIN, DG COMP, DG EMPL, DG AGRI, DG TREN, DG DEV, DG ENV, DG RTD, DG INFSO, DG FISH, DG MARKT, DG REGIO, DG TAXUD, DG SANCO, DG JLS, DG ELARG, and DG ECHO. The seven Directorates-General that deal with general and internal services include: DG ADMIN, DG COMM, DG BUDG, DG IAS, DG DIGIT, DG SCIC, and DG T. Of these, we focused our attention on the following three: DG ADMIN (Personnel and Administration), DG BUDG (Budget), and DG IAS (Financial Control). For a list of the Directorates-General under the Barroso Commission, and a full explanation of these abbreviations, see Spence 2006: 131-133 and http://ec.europa.eu/dgs_en.htm.

³ That being said, we decided also to contact the Director-General of a fourth Special Service.

Operationalization of the dependent variable

Below is a list of the questions we posed to respondents related to their democratic orientations. Given the semi-structured nature of our interviews, officials not only responded to the specific questions but often also used them as springboards for larger discussions of the topic in question.

1. Democratic orientations towards the Council

- “There are those who lament the fact that the Commission cannot do its job properly because member-state governments are able to veto policies. Do you agree with this assessment?”

2. Democratic orientations towards the Parliament

- “On average, how much contact do you have with members of the European Parliament?”
- “What form does your contact with the EP take?”
- “On the whole, who initiates these contacts?”
- “European citizens elect a European Parliament which has considerable powers in the EU. To what extent do you agree with this statement?”
- “The EU would be more democratic if the European Parliament was able to pass a vote of no confidence on individual Commissioners in the College. Do you agree with this assessment?”

3. Democratic orientations towards interest groups

- “How important a role do you think interest groups play in generating innovative policies?”
- “How important a role do you think interest groups play in the formulating of policy more generally?”

Operationalization of possible explanatory variables

Below is a list of potential explanatory variables and related hypotheses for officials’ democratic orientations.

1. Values and beliefs

We examine the following two questions as potential predictors of officials’ democratic orientations to the Council, Parliament, and organized civil society.

- “If we look at the academic and popular literature on the EU, quite often we find two visions of the EU. On the one hand, we have an *intergovernmental* vision. On the other hand, we have a *community-oriented* vision. If you were to think of a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being intergovernmental and 10 being community-oriented, where do you think the EU should be in on this scale in 10 years’ time?”
- “To whom should the Commission ideally be accountable? (Just to the Council? Just to the Parliament? To both equally? To both, but more to the Council? To both, but more to the Parliament? Other?)”

HYPOTHESES:

All else being equal, the stronger an official’s preference for supranationalism as the ideal organizing principle of European integration...

- I. the more critical he/she will be of the Council’s veto power,
- II. the more contact he/she will have with the EP,
- III. the more proactive will he/she be in interacting with the EP,

- IV. the more likely he/she is to support the EP having more control over the appointment of individual Commissioners, and
- V. the more positive he/she will be with regard to the role played by interest groups.

2. Policy-specific institutional context

We have identified a range of institutional/structural variables as potential predictors of officials' democratic orientations; a different set of institutional variables is used depending on whether we are examining officials' attitudes and behaviour towards the Council, Parliament, or interest groups.

▪ Orientation towards the Council

- Does the official work in a DG that deals with a policy area in which the Council predominantly votes by unanimity, qualified majority, or a mixture of the two procedures?
- Does the official work in a DG that deals with a policy area in which the predominant comitology procedure is advisory, management, regulatory, or a mixture of two or more of these?

HYPOTHESES:

- I. All else being equal, officials who work in DGs that deal with policy areas in which the Council predominantly votes by unanimity will be more critical of the Council's veto power.
- II. All else being equal, officials who work in DGs that deal with policy areas in which the predominant comitology procedure is regulatory will be more critical of the Council's veto power.

▪ Orientation towards the Parliament

- Does the official work in a DG that deals with a policy area in which the EP enjoys a high or low degree of legislative influence (as judged by the legislative procedure used—co-decision, consultation, assent, etc. as well as success rate of using the consultation procedure to amend legislation through the power of delay).

HYPOTHESES:

All else being equal, officials who work in DGs that deal with policy areas in which the EP enjoys a high (as opposed to a low) degree of legislative influence will be...

- I. in more regular contact with the EP
- II. more proactive in initiating contact with the EP
- III. more likely to believe the EP has considerable powers

▪ Orientation towards interest groups

- Does the official work in a DG with a large or small number of expert groups?
- Does the official work in a DG with a large or small number of consultative fora—i.e. where interest groups are given more privileged access?
- Does the official work in a DG that deals predominantly with a regulatory or distributive policy area?

HYPOTHESES:

- I. All else being equal, officials who work in DGs with a large (as opposed to a small) number of expert groups will be more likely to see interest groups as playing an important role in generating innovative policy.
- II. All else being equal, officials who work in DGs with a large (as opposed to a small) number of consultative fora will be more likely to see interest groups as playing an important role in generating innovative policy.

- III. All else being equal, officials who work in DGs that deal with regulatory policy areas will be more sanguine about the policy role played by interest groups than officials who work in DGs that deal with distributive policy areas.

3. Nationality

A third potential predictor of the variation we observe in officials' attitudes and behaviour towards the Council, Parliament, and interest groups is individual official's country of origin, and in particular the nature of state-society relations (e.g. corporatism, pluralist) in that country.

HYPOTHESES:

- I. All else being equal, officials who come from countries where the involvement of interest groups in national policy making is high (corporatist and pluralist systems) will express more positive attitudes toward the role played by interest groups in EU policy making.