



# The scheduling power of the EU Council Presidency

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## ABSTRACT

Does the Presidency of the Council of the European Union have the ability to direct the political attention of this body by emphasizing and de-emphasizing policy issues according to its own priorities? This study examines this question empirically by relying on a new dataset on the monthly meeting duration of Council working parties in different policy areas between 1995 and 2014. The results of variance component analyses show that a considerable part of the over-time variation in the relative amount of political attention devoted to a policy area is systematically related to different Presidency periods. While not negating the constraints imposed on the Presidency by inherited agendas, programming and co-ordination requirements with other actors, the findings are consistent with the view that the Presidency has substantial scope for agenda-setting by determining what issues are being discussed, when they are being discussed and how much time is devoted for their discussion.


**KEY WORDS** Agenda-setting; Council of the European Union; political attention; Presidency; scheduling power

The lack of continuity witnessed between Presidencies can be seen in the temptation experienced by each Presidency to stamp their particular priorities on the Union during their stewardship. (Javier Solana [Council 2001: 12])

## The powers of the Council Presidency

Does the institution of the Presidency provide member states with an opportunity to yield disproportionate influence over decision-making in the Council of the European Union? What powers does the Presidency have at its disposal to influence the process and outcome of Council negotiations? Being in charge of convening and chairing meetings at all levels of the Council's organizational structure, the Presidency might be able to affect decision-making by setting the policy agenda. However, several observations support a sceptical

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view about the Presidency's extent of agenda-setting power: being dependent on the Commission to initiate legislation, the Presidency does not have strong formal institutional proposal-making powers, it is only in office for six months, it inherits much of the agenda of its predecessors, it is expected to comply with a norm of neutrality, and it often has to react to unforeseen external events or drawn-out crises that require immediate action. In more recent years, the introduction of programming across several Presidency terms has potentially added further constraints (Batory and Puetter 2013).

Yet, recent empirical studies have challenged this negative assessment of the Presidency's agenda-setting power. In these studies, two distinct uses of the term 'agenda-setting power' have to be distinguished. The first use of the term refers to agenda-setting power as the power to influence decision-making outcomes through privileged suggestions regarding the content of new policy. Most of the recent empirical research has focused on this type of agenda-setting power (Aksoy 2010; Schalk *et al.* 2007; Tallberg 2008; Thomson 2008; Warntjen 2008). I refer to this type of power as *proposal-making power*. The Presidency has special prerogatives when it comes to suggesting amendments to the Commission proposal. By exploiting the possibility that not all member states have to agree to its proposal under the qualified majority rule, and its access to privileged information about member states' preferences and possible outcome options, the Presidency has the potential to present acceptable 'compromise' proposals that move the final negotiation outcome closer to its own favoured policy.

The second use of the term refers to agenda-setting power as the power to influence the allocation of the Council's political attention over specific policy issues by distributing limited time and space resources for meetings. I refer to this type of power as the Presidency's *scheduling power*. During its half-year term, the Presidency organizes the Council's work. The Presidency decides who meets, for how long and when. Meetings at all levels of the Council's organizational hierarchy are convened by the Presidency. The Presidency does not only determine the timing and length of working party, committee and ministerial meetings, but also the content of discussions. By drafting the agenda of meetings and by chairing them, the Presidency decides whether a topic will be discussed and how much meeting time will be spent on discussing it. Little empirical research has focused on the effects of the Presidency's scheduling power (Tallberg 2003; Warntjen 2007; Warntjen 2013a; Warntjen 2013b), even though the allocation of attention to a certain policy problem logically precedes and therefore serves as a precondition for any influence on the content of decision-making outcomes. As further elaborated below, the two types of agenda-setting power are the result of distinct activities, which differ in their sources of authority, motivations and causal mechanisms.

In empirical terms, the study is exclusively concerned with the Presidency's scheduling power. In particular, the study addresses the question about the extent to which the Presidency has the power to emphasize or de-emphasize the attention devoted by the Council to certain policy issues. To clarify the research objective, the study first develops a conceptual framework that is based on insights from Tallberg's (2003) discussion of the Presidency's agenda-shaping powers and Jones and Baumgartner's (2005) general theoretical approach to the study of policy agendas and the allocation of political attention. In line with the Jones and Baumgartner's (2005) view, the Council can be seen as being continuously confronted with a potentially infinite number of public and political demands. Yet, like other political institutions, it holds only a limited capacity for organizational information processing. In such a high-information environment, the Presidency's scheduling power acts as a filter to determine the allocation of the Council's scarce time and space resources to attend to a selective number of issues. As special cases, the Presidency's scheduling power includes the complete inclusion of previously latent issues on and the complete exclusion of previously salient issues from the agenda; but most of the time, the level of attention granted to an issue by the Presidency will be a matter of degree.<sup>1</sup> Of course, the mere existence of scheduling power does not necessarily mean that governments use that power to disproportionately progress their own favoured issues. Almost by definition, the Presidency's filtering of external demands will lead to disproportionate and biased allocation of attention, but whether and to what extent this bias will favour the progression of the Presidency's own priorities is ultimately an empirical question.

To shed more light on this matter, I employ a novel dataset of political attention in the Council based on the date and duration of working party meetings in different policy sectors between 1995 and 2014. Given large obstacles in creating a valid and reliable measure of Presidency priorities over such an extensive period of time and range of policy areas, I do not perform some form of correlational analysis, but restrict the empirical analysis to a test of an observable implication of the scheduling power argument about the over-time variation in the relative level of attention directed at a policy area. In particular, I conduct a variance component analysis of the time-series data of political attention for each individual policy sector. These analyses assess whether and to what extent changes in the relative duration of working party meetings over time coincide with changes in the country holding the Presidency. Although passing such a 'hoop test' does not provide very strong positive support for the scheduling power argument, failing it is sufficient to credibly reject it. The results demonstrate that in almost all policy areas, Presidency periods account for a considerable amount of variation in the time-series. In addition, the relative and absolute effects for Presidency periods are also of substantive size.

## Scheduling vs proposal-making power

The Presidency of the Council lacks any major formal rights that would lead us to expect that it has a strong influence on the process and outcome of Council decision-making. Neither the treaties nor the Council's rules of procedure provide the Presidency with exclusive rights to schedule meetings, determine agendas or suggest amendments to the Commission's proposal (Warntjen 2006). On the contrary, the treaties guarantee that Council meetings can be convened at the request of any one member state or even at the request of the Commission.<sup>2</sup> Also, the Council's rules of procedure specify that any member state or the Commission can demand the inclusion of an item on the Council's agenda.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the formal rules do not specify any distinct proposal or amendment rights for the Presidency, implying that it does not enjoy any special prerogatives in that respect.

Indeed, the Council's rules of procedure are generally silent on the conduct of meetings. Even the general rule that all meetings of Council bodies are to be chaired by the Presidency can only be derived from the explicit definition of exceptions in the Council's rules of procedure. However, the absence of formal rules does not mean that Council negotiations are not subject to informal norms and role expectations. In the case of the Council, participants generally accept that it is the task of the Presidency to manage the conduct of meetings and organize debate. To aid the timely and successful conclusion of negotiations, the Presidency is also supposed to act as a broker between disagreeing factions. Providing compromise proposals that are able to reconcile the interests of those factions is a major instrument to ensure an efficient outcome of negotiations. Yet, the Presidency might also be able to move the final negotiations outcome closer to its own preferred policy position by suggesting compromise proposals that favour its own views. An informal norm of neutrality is supposed to counteract such tendencies (e.g., Niemann and Mak 2010). The Presidency is expected to be 'neutral and impartial' (Council 2006: 14). The common practice of splitting the roles of Presidency chairperson and national government representative amongst different delegates from the Presidency member state aids the maintenance of this norm.

However, if the Presidency's proposals appear too biased and threaten to lead to negotiation outcomes that unfairly disadvantage some member states, those member states might decide to offer alternative compromise proposals. The Presidency's compromise proposal may act as a focal point as long as it is *perceived* to be fair or as long as the chances of success of a counter-offer are marginal. In other words, the Presidency's proposal-making power is conditional on the Presidency either being able to exploit informational asymmetries about the real policy positions of member states or possible outcome options, or on satisfying a sufficiently large number of

member states so that alternative proposals will not be able to sway support. Thus, the Presidency's proposal-making power is far from absolute. The question is not whether the Presidency can influence negotiation outcomes in its favour at all, but to what extent it is able to do so and under what conditions.

With regard to the Presidency's scheduling power, the formal rules are more explicit. In contrast to the almost complete silence of formal rules on the role of the Presidency in leading the conduct of negotiations, the organization of meetings and agendas receives considerable attention in the Council's rules of procedure.<sup>4</sup> The rules of procedure outline the duties of the Presidency to develop indicative timetables (Art. 1.2) and agendas for each ministerial meeting (Art. 3.1) well in advance of its term in office. This formal requirement of long-term programming seems to stand in partial contradiction to the requirement to convene meetings at the request of individual member states or the Commission. If member states or the Commission made frequent use of this right, sensible long-term programming would be impossible. Given these conflicting formal norms, it is not surprising that an informal norm has developed that acknowledges the prerogative of the Presidency to determine meeting schedules of the Council. As the *Presidency Handbook of the Council Guide* (Council 2006: 20) states, 'the Presidency examines the other delegations' requests and comments carefully but it is accepted that, since it is in charge of organizing work, it is the Presidency which determines the timetable'. Indeed, the prerogative of the Presidency to schedule meetings and set agenda topics at least partly according to its own priorities is not affected by the norm of neutrality, which mainly relates to the conduct of negotiations:

The duty to be neutral exists alongside the political dimension which informs the conduct of Union business and which is particularly apparent in the order of priority set in the choice and handling of items of business. This order of priority is occasioned by considerations of topicality and of deadlines, as well as by the political tone which the Presidency wishes to set for its six-month period. (Council 2006: 14)

From a purely practical point of view, the ability to programme the Council's work over a number of months in advance is necessitated by the need to ensure the availability of the required meeting rooms and interpreters. Of course, just like the Presidency's proposal power, its scheduling power is also conditional and subject to a potential override by other member states or the Commission. In the last resort, the formal rules that each member state or the Commission can request a meeting of the Council and the inclusion of specific items on the agenda stands and can be referred to by those actors to enforce their will. However, given the normative and practical constraints, the cost of interference with the Presidency's organization of the Council's work is high. In addition, the six-monthly rotation of the Presidency

**Table 1.** Proposal-making vs scheduling power.

	Proposal-making power	Scheduling power
Source	Informal amendment rules	Formal and informal scheduling rules
Goal	Implementation of policy preferences	Implementation of policy priorities
Means	Making compromise proposals	Allocation of time and meeting space

ensures that any issue another member state or the Commission would like to see discussed is blocked from the agenda at most temporarily. Thus, the costs of forcing an issue on the agenda or convening an additional meeting are considerable, while the potential benefits are small. [Table 1](#) summarizes the conceptual discussion so far.

The Presidency's proposal-making and scheduling power differ according to their source of authority, the goal with which the Presidency employs them, and the practical means to achieve them. Proposal-making power is not supported by formal rules, but rests on tradition, convention and informal norms that grant the Presidency's proposals an elevated status. In contrast, the rules of procedure clearly specify the duty of the Presidency to organize the meetings and agendas of the Council. Thus, the Presidency's scheduling power rests on a comparatively firmer footing than its proposal-making power, even if other formal rules partly contradict it. The two powers also differ clearly in the pursuit of the type of goal for which they might be employed. The exercise of proposal-making power might be used to bias the outcome of decision-making in favour of the Presidency's policy preferences. The exercise of scheduling power might be used to progress discussions on some policy issues at the expense of others in line with the Presidency's priorities. In contrast to a bias in distributive decision-making outcomes, the differential progression of policy issues does not necessarily lead to obvious winners and losers. Thus, the consequences of exercising scheduling power are generally more benign and less likely to incite counter-acting reactions by other member states or the Commission. As a result, the pursuit of particular priorities by the Presidency is considered legitimate, whereas the pursuit of particular preferences is not. Finally, proposal-making power and scheduling power differ in the practical means through which they are executed. Proposal-making power relies on the Presidency making proposals to find a compromise between disagreeing coalitions. Scheduling power works through the allocation of scarce time and meeting space resources.

### Existing research findings

Although the consequences of the Presidency's scheduling power are likely to be more pronounced and visible, most recent research has focused on the consequences of its proposal-making power. Schalk *et al.* (2007), Tallberg

(2004), Thomson (2008), and Warntjen (2008) find that holding the Presidency at the time when a decision is adopted increases a country's influence on policy outcomes. Aksoy (2010) concludes that holding the Presidency during European Union (EU) budget and financial perspective negotiations increases the share of money received by a country. Only Arregui and Thomson (2009) suggest that the influence of the Presidency might have waned with the increase in the number of member states in 2004. All in all, most existing research finds that the Presidency confers some additional influence on member states, even though its effects seem to be rather modest in size (Aksoy 2010; Arregui and Thomson 2009; Thomson 2008).<sup>5</sup>

Despite the rather more favourable conditions for the Presidency to exercise scheduling power, little research has examined the extent to which the Presidency is able to emphasize or de-emphasize the attention devoted to different policy issues. Alexandrova and Timmermans (2013) study the consequences of Presidency priorities on the agenda of the European Council, and Warntjen (2007) studies the effect of Presidency priorities on legislative production in the area of environmental policy. Alexandrova and Timmermans find that 'overall, holding the Presidency does not make a difference in the influencing of the agenda of the European Council' (2013: 328), but whether these findings generalize to the Council of the EU, where agenda space is less restricted, remains to be seen. In contrast, Warntjen (2007) observes a substantially large association between the salience attached to environmental issues by the government parties of the country holding the Presidency and the number of first reading Council decisions made in that policy area.

Warntjen's (2013b) interviews with practitioners also lend support to the notion that the Presidency plays an influential role in shaping the agenda of the Council in line with its own priorities, and that this power has not significantly waned as a result of the institutional changes introduced by the Lisbon treaty. Finally, Warntjen's (2013a) case study of protracted Council decision-making on a set of particularly controversial legislative proposals in the area of Occupational Health and Safety shows how Presidencies that prioritized those issues were particularly successful in advancing the negotiations. Of particular relevance for the current study, his research demonstrates that the scheduling of additional meetings was one of the mechanisms relied upon by Presidencies to make progress on the legislative files. Building on these promising results, the current study examines a wider cross-sectoral domain, covering all policy areas, and a process (i.e., meeting time) rather than an outcome measure (e.g., legislative decisions or collective policy statements) of the Presidency's scheduling power, which shortens the causal chain connecting priorities to the dependent variable and thus allows for a more direct empirical test.

## Data and method

To assess the distribution of the Council's political attention, this study relies on a dataset of the timing and length of Council working party meetings between 1 January 1995 and 31 December 2014. For the analysis, I aggregate the data about individual meetings to create a measure of the overall duration of meetings in a particular policy area and month. The dependent variable used in the variance components analyses measures the percentage of meeting time in a particular policy area in relation to the total duration of meetings in a particular month. The statistical analysis examines whether the over-time development in the policy area time-series exhibits the type of variation implied by the scheduling power argument.

Working parties consist of representatives of member state governments and the Commission at the level of officials. They scrutinize the details of a legislative proposal and usually come to an agreement on most of its provisions. Much of the legislative work of the Council takes place in those groups (Häge 2008, 2013). Importantly, and in contrast to the more institutionalized timetable of ministerial meetings, whose frequencies hardly vary over time, the Presidency has considerable leeway in deciding to convene or not convene working party meetings. The process of allocating scarce meeting room and interpretation resources to working parties works like a distributed system with a central clearing unit.<sup>6</sup> In close collaboration with the relevant unit of the Council's General Secretariat, a single person in the Permanent Representation of the Presidency country is put in charge of the allocation of meeting rooms and interpreters. As the Council's *Presidency Handbook* specifies, this central meeting co-ordinator acts 'on behalf of the chairperson of Coreper [the Council's Committee of Permanent Representatives], and on his or her authority'. In case the demand for meeting rooms or interpretation facilities exceeds supply, the person is 'empowered to notify the General Secretariat of the Presidency's priorities' and 'must be able to negotiate with working party chairpersons and, if need be, arbitrate' (Council 2006: 22). Months in advance of the start of the Presidency term, designated working party chairs submit requests for rooms and interpreters. Collectively, these requests generally exceed the extremely limited Council resources. Thus, the central meeting co-ordinator's task is to align demand and supply. Over time, the initial version of the working party timetable is continuously updated in light of new developments, not only before but throughout the term of the Presidency.

The description of the meeting room allocation process makes two important points. First, a clear mechanism exists that links Presidency priorities causally to the allocation of scarce meeting room resources. In order to receive additional resources, working party chairs have to make a case for their demands, and an important criterion for the central co-ordinator in deciding

about the allocation of resources in light of conflicting demands is their alignment with and achievement of the Presidency's priorities. Second, this causal mechanism is short and direct. The Presidency has a relatively free hand in deciding about the scheduling of meetings, and one of the main decision criteria is its priorities. As a result of the short causal chain between the independent and dependent variable, a multitude of alternative explanations for the distribution of meeting room resources, and thus the Council's political attention, are ruled out by design.<sup>7</sup>

The raw information for the dataset was provided by the General Secretariat of the Council in response to requests of access to documents. The spreadsheets supplied by the Council Secretariat list the dates, the time slots ('am' for morning, 'pm' for afternoon and 'ev' for evening), and the French titles of meetings in chronological order. In total, the original files include 78,959 meeting entries. Unfortunately, the spreadsheet entries are not confined to meetings of working parties proper, but contain details for all types of meetings taking place on Council premises. Also, no standardized titles are used to refer to individual working parties. Thus, the generation of the final dataset involved several labour-intensive steps: First, I manually coded the titles of all working party meetings and dropped all non-working party meeting entries, relying on several versions of the Council Secretariat's official 'List of Council preparatory bodies' to identify the population of working parties and distinguish working party from other types of meetings. Second, I removed duplicate observations and added separate observations for each working party taking part in a joint meeting with others. Third, I cross-validated the coding of working party titles in the meeting data by comparing it with information about a working party's existence from the lists of Council preparatory bodies, which resulted in a number of corrections. Finally, I aggregated the data of individual working parties and their duration by month and policy area. Given that the original files report the duration of meetings in terms of half-day slots, the duration of working party meetings per month and policy area is measured in half-day units.

In distinguishing policy areas, I followed the Council's own categorization scheme that it uses to structure its lists of preparatory bodies. This categorization scheme corresponds to the different sectoral formations of the Council. At the beginning of the study period, the Council's policy categorization scheme referred to 19 policy areas. As a result of the merging of several Council formations in 2002, these 19 categories were reduced to 10. As far as the original categories refer to clearly distinguishable policy areas, I retain the original categories for the entire period. I only merge the area of 'Information Society' with 'Telecommunications' and the area of 'Industry' with 'Internal Market'. In both instances, the dividing line between areas is not very clear. In purely practical terms, such ambiguity makes it difficult to clearly allocate the meetings of working parties established after the 2002

reform to one or the other of the original categories. The remaining original categories do not suffer from this problem. These choices led to a policy measure distinguishing 17 areas.<sup>8</sup> The aggregation of the daily meeting duration data by policy area and month results in a panel dataset of 3,740 observations (220 months times 17 policy sectors) indicating the total monthly duration of working party meetings in a policy area.<sup>9</sup>

Examining the relationship between Presidency priorities and the Council's political attention empirically generates a number of methodological challenges. At least when considering attention at the level of entire policy areas, the strategy of measuring it by the aggregate duration of meetings in those areas should yield very valid results. However, it is less clear-cut how Presidency priorities can be measured in a meaningful manner. At first sight, published Presidency programmes seem to be the most direct and readily available source of information about Presidency priorities.<sup>10</sup> However, those documents vary widely in their length, structure, style and detail devoted to different policy areas. Given these systematic differences across documents, none of the currently popular content analysis methods based on counting the number of words or other text elements would yield comparable results.

Given these difficulties, I pursue a less ideal but practically feasible approach that does not rely on the explicit measurement of Presidency priorities. I employ a variance component analysis to determine how much of the over-time variation in the relative duration of working party meetings in a certain policy area is owing to systematic differences between Presidency periods. If the Presidency is a purely reactive actor, which is only following established schedules, responding to ongoing crises and more or less randomly occurring external events, then most of the variability in the time-series should be absorbed by a time trend or accounted for by seasonal effects and the error term. Presidency periods should account for little or no variability. In contrast, if the Presidency exercises scheduling power, then a considerable amount of the variability in the time-series should be related to the six-month periods of the rotating Presidency.

One weakness of this approach is that any Presidency period effect might be the composite result of internally and externally induced priorities. In other words, the causal effect of internally induced priorities cannot be identified unambiguously and is possibly overstated. However, the extent to which environmental factors confound the results depends on the degree of their co-variation with six-month Presidency periods. Many external pressures last for a much shorter or much longer period of time. Still, the analysis below can best be described as a 'hoop test' (van Evera 1997: 31). The absence of a substantial Presidency period effect decisively rejects the scheduling power hypothesis; yet, a finding of a substantial Presidency period effect does not provide very strong support for it. In practice, a research design can only be evaluated in comparison to feasible alternatives (Gerring

2011). Arguably, a variance component analysis that delivers a decisive negative test is more valuable than a correlational study with an at best imperfectly measured independent variable that leads to neither a credible rejection of the hypothesis in the case of a negative test result nor credible support in the case of a positive one.

## The effect of Presidency periods

In the following, I investigate the sources of the over-time variation in the Council's political attention through variance component analyses. I conduct a separate analysis for each policy sector, relying on the percentage of working party meeting time in that sector for a given month as an indicator of the relative allocation of attention to that area. The analysis is conducted separately for each time-series because variation over time across Presidency periods is the main dimension of interest, and the consistently large cross-sectional variation between policy areas would swamp out the comparatively small over-time variation in a pooled analysis. To account for medium- to long-term determinants of the Council's political attention, I first de-trend each of the time-series.

For the de-trending, I use a locally weighted scatter plot smoother (lowess). Being a non-parametric smoother that bases its predictions on data within a local window of the time-series, lowess is quite flexible in following the ups and downs in the time-series. After visual inspection, I selected a value of 0.4 (or 40 per cent of the data) for the window bandwidth, which results in a reasonable amount of smoothing without over-fitting the time-series. Figure A1 in the Online Appendix shows the observed time-series for each policy area and the estimated time trend. Since the choice of bandwidth value is somewhat subjective and arbitrary, I report replications of the entire analysis with bandwidth values varied by a factor of 2 (i.e., 0.2 and 0.8 respectively) in the Online Appendix as well. Not surprisingly, the detailed results of the analyses change, but the qualitative conclusion that Presidency periods account for a substantial amount of over-time variation in most policy areas remains stable even when a very small bandwidth of 0.2 is selected. After de-trending, the variance components for each time-series are estimated through a linear mixed effects regression model, including only an intercept in the fixed part of the model and effects for Presidency period as well as month of the year in the random part. For each policy area, the model takes the following form:

$$Attention_t = \alpha + \gamma_p + \delta_m + \varepsilon_t \quad (1)$$

$$\gamma_p \sim Norm(0, \sigma_\gamma^2)$$

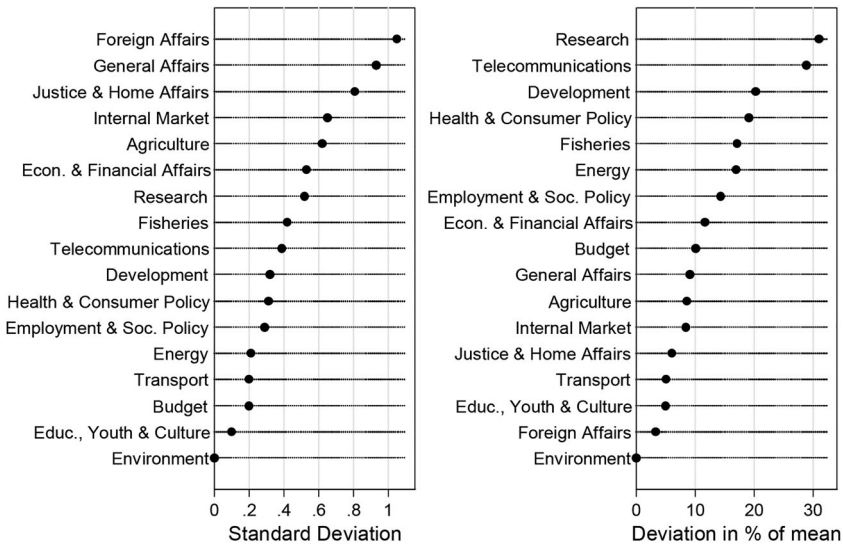
$$\delta_m \sim Norm(0, \sigma_\delta^2)$$

$$\varepsilon_t \sim Norm(0, \sigma_\varepsilon^2)$$

for  $t = 1, \dots, 220$  months,  $p = 1, \dots, 40$  Presidency periods, and  $m = 1, \dots, 11$  months of the year.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the covariances amongst random effects and the error term are assumed to be zero. The dependent variable 'attention' consists of the de-trended percentage values of the total duration of working party meetings in the particular policy area. The fixed part of the model with the intercept  $\alpha$  provides essentially an estimate of the grand mean of the time-series. The random part of the model provides estimates for how much the time series values vary around that mean across different Presidency periods and different months of the year, respectively. The random effects for the month of the year are included because most time-series indicate substantial seasonal patterns. The random effects allow for separate intercepts for each Presidency period and each month of the year. However, rather than estimating a separate coefficient for each of those intercepts as in fixed effects estimation, a single parameter for their distribution is estimated. In particular, the regression analyses estimate the standard deviations of those intercepts around the grand mean. In addition, any variation not captured by Presidency periods and month of the year is supposed to be the result of random error.

Effectively, each analysis assumes that the total variance around the grand mean can be decomposed into variability owing to differences in Presidency periods, owing to month of the year, and owing to idiosyncratic fluctuations specific to a certain month (i.e., the error term). Variance components are computed by first squaring the estimated standard deviations of the random effects and the error term to arrive at variances. Adding up the variances gives us an estimate for the total variance in the time-series. Dividing the variance of an individual random effect or the error term by the total variance and multiplying the resulting proportion by 100 yields the respective variance component as a percentage of the total variance in the de-trended time-series.

Figure 1 presents the substantive effect sizes of Presidency periods for different policy areas. The left panel presents the raw estimates of the standard deviations and the right panel expresses them in terms of percentages of the mean of the original (i.e., not de-trended) time-series. Figure A2 in the Online Appendix plots fitted against observed values for each individual policy area time-series based on the regression estimates of the grand mean and these random effects for Presidency periods to further illustrate the effects. With the exception of Environment and possible Education, Youth and Culture, the standard deviation estimates for Presidency periods are all of substantive size. The left panel shows that policy areas with the largest overall percentage of meeting duration tend to have the largest absolute fluctuations around the time trend, which is not very surprising. For example, the three areas with the largest percentage shares of working party meeting time, Foreign Affairs, General Affairs, and Justice and Home

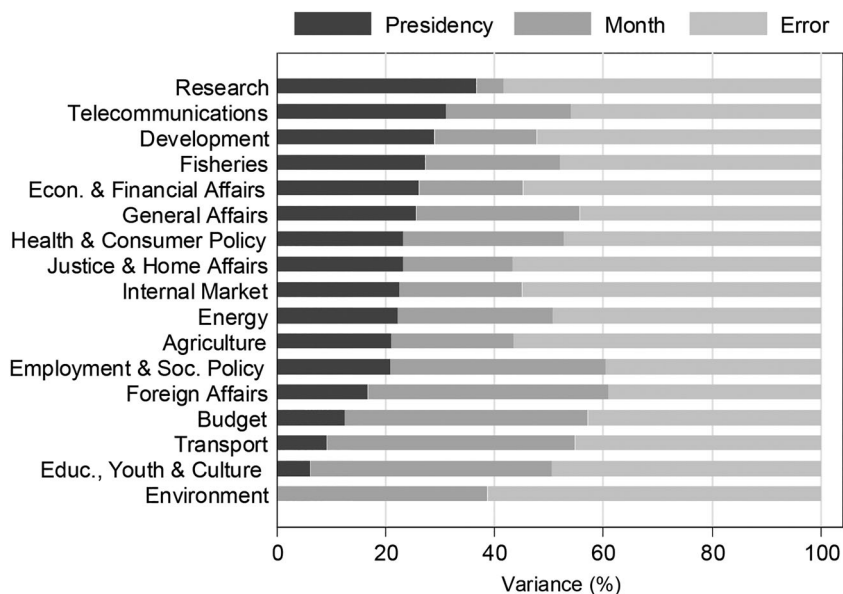


**Figure 1.** Estimated standard deviations of Presidency period random effects.

Affairs, also exhibit the largest standard deviations of 1.05, 0.94 and 0.82 percentage points, respectively. At the other end of the spectrum, policy areas with smaller shares of working party meeting time, like Transport, Budget or Education, Youth and Culture, also have smaller absolute standard deviation sizes (i.e., 0.20, 0.20, and 0.10 respectively).<sup>12</sup>

Given the large differences in the overall shares of working party meeting time across policy areas, effect sizes are more sensibly assessed and compared when expressed in relative terms. In the right panel of Figure 1, the standard deviations are given as percentages of the mean of the original time-series. At the upper end of the range of effect sizes, the panel indicates that Presidency periods are associated with average deviations of about 31 per cent of the mean percentage in the area of Research, and 29 per cent in the area of Telecommunications. With the exception of Environment (0 per cent), Foreign Affairs (3 per cent), Transport (5 per cent), and Education, Youth and Culture (5 per cent), all remaining policy areas show substantively large relative deviation values between 5 per cent and 20 per cent.

Finally, Figure 2 presents the relative size of variance components of Presidency periods, month of the year and time-period specific fluctuations. Whereas Figure 1 is concerned with comparing effect sizes across policy areas, Figure 2 allows an evaluation of the relevance of different sources of variation within each policy area time-series. Most policy areas that, in relative terms, indicate a large relative standard deviation for Presidency period random effects in the right panel of Figure 1 also account for a larger part of the variance in the relative amount of attention devoted to a certain



**Figure 2.** Variance components estimates by policy area, 1995–2014.

policy sector over time. In the area of Research, about 37 per cent of the time-series variation is owing to systematic differences across Presidency periods, followed by 29 per cent in Telecommunications, 29 per cent in Development and 28 per cent in Fisheries. With the exception of Environment (0 per cent), Education, Youth, and Culture (6 per cent) and Transport (10 per cent), Presidency periods account for more than 10 per cent of the variance in the time-series of all policy areas.

## Conclusion

This article assesses the scheduling power of the Presidency of the Council of the EU. Conceptually, the Presidency's scheduling power is distinguished from its proposal-making power. While the latter is aimed at affecting the content of decision-making outcomes, the former is aimed at determining which issues receive more or less attention in the decision-making process. While the Presidency's proposal-making power has received considerable attention in recent years, its scheduling power has been largely neglected. To examine the Presidency's ability to allocate the Council's sparse time and meeting room resources according to its own priorities, this study analyses a new dataset with detailed information on the date and duration of Council working party meetings between the beginning of 1995 and the end of 2014. Using the monthly share of working party meeting time in a policy

area as an indicator of political attention, the sector-specific variance components analyses demonstrate that a considerable part of the over-time changes in attention is owing to systematic differences between Presidency periods.

Presidency periods have a particularly large effect in Telecommunications, Research, Development and Fisheries, where they account for about one-third of the variability around the time trend. The effect sizes in the remaining policy areas are more moderate, but with the exception of Environment and Education, Youth and Culture, Presidency periods still account for at least 10 per cent of the variability in the relative amount of attention devoted to a certain policy area. Thus, in general, the findings of the analysis refute the claim that the Presidency is unable to direct the Council's political attention in line with its own priorities. Even though much of the Council's agenda might be inherited, subject to medium- and long-term programming, reliant on co-ordination with other institutional actors like the European Parliament (EP) or the Commission, or shaken up by unforeseen shocks and external developments (e.g., the financial crisis), much of the variation in the Council's political attention is systematically related to the rotation of the Council's chairmanship.

Because the empirical analysis is restricted to a test of an observable implication of the scheduling power argument about the over-time distribution in the dependent variable, it cannot deliver covariational support for the existence of a causal link between priorities and political attention. However, a recent qualitative study by Warntjen (2013a) provides such complementary evidence about the link between the two variables. Studying a protracted decision-making process in the area of Occupational Health and Safety involving 12 Presidency periods, Warntjen's extensively cross-validated qualitative coding of priorities is clearly associated with the number of working party meetings scheduled by the Presidency. Assessing the validity of his findings for a broader range of cases and across different policy areas is a promising task for future research.

Indeed, the current study suggests that significant variation exists across policy areas in the degree to which the Presidency enjoys scheduling power. To some extent, these differences might well be quasi-mechanical consequences of differences in the overall level of activity across policy areas. Areas with a generally broad policy scope are less likely to experience large relative changes over time than areas with a generally narrow scope. Because areas with a broad policy scope (e.g., Foreign Policy) involve many constitutive issues, any increase in the emphasis of one issue (e.g., human rights) might be easily cancelled out by less emphasis on another one (e.g., international terrorism).

Another, more substantive explanation concerns differences in the organizational structure of the Council. The number of working parties and their

degree of specialization varies considerably across policy areas. The area of Environment is an extreme example: a single working party deals with all 'domestic' environmental policy issues. Given its wide policy scope, the working party is essentially in constant session and, by convention, meets on a weekly basis. In cases where meeting patterns are institutionalized to such a degree, the discretion of the Presidency to allocate additional or less meeting time to a working party is rather limited. Indeed, the fact that the analysis did not find a variance component associated with Presidency periods in the area of Environment lends some credence to this explanation. However, to come to firmer conclusions in this respect, future research needs to investigate the reasons for cross-policy variation in the Presidency's scheduling power more thoroughly and in greater detail, both in theoretical and empirical terms.

## Notes

1. Thus, the concept of scheduling power is related to but narrower than Tallberg's (2003) concept of agenda-shaping power. Amongst Tallberg's (2003) three ways in which Presidencies can shape the Council's agenda, scheduling power coincides to a large extent with Tallberg's 'agenda-structuring'. However, the concept of scheduling power also includes the complete omission of issues from the agenda, which is part of Tallberg's 'agenda exclusion', and the inclusion of new issues, which is part of Tallberg's 'agenda-setting'.
2. Art. 237 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) (formerly Art. 204 of the Treaty establishing the European Community [TEC]).
3. Art. 3.2 of the Council's Rules of Procedure in Official Journal (2009) Council Decision of 1 December 2009 adopting the Council's Rules of Procedure (2009/937/EU). L325/35, 11 December.
4. Art. 3.2 of the Council's Rules of Procedure in Official Journal (2009) Council Decision of 1 December 2009 adopting the Council's Rules of Procedure (2009/937/EU). L325/35, 11 December.
5. Tallberg (2010: 252) provides further supporting examples. In contrast, Kleine (2013) suggests that the Presidency keeps proposals intentionally off the agenda whose content it would strongly like to shape in a certain direction, in order to be able to make credible compromise proposals and fulfil its role as an efficient facilitator of negotiations. In this view, the Presidency deliberately uses its scheduling power to alleviate fears by other member states that it might use its proposal-making power to their disadvantage.
6. Where not indicated otherwise, the following description is based on two interviews with central meeting co-ordinators of different Presidency countries on 19 July 2012.
7. In particular, the short causal chain rules out alternative explanations that might affect alternative dependent variables based on measures of collective Council decisions (e.g., laws or policy statements), which are not under direct and immediate control of the Presidency, but depend on the actions of other actors. Of course, characteristics of the dossier under consideration (e.g., the complexity of the proposal, level of conflict or deadlines) affect scheduling decisions as well, but given that it is difficult to prevent the Presidency from 'dragging its feet' on issues that it does not want to pursue or from scheduling

additional meetings on issues it deems important, they are at most mediating factors that may weaken (if the dossier is not a priority) or amplify (if the dossier is a priority) the relationship between priorities and attention.

8. The different areas are: General Affairs; Foreign Affairs; Development; Budget; Economic and Financial Affairs; Justice and Home Affairs; Agriculture; Fisheries; Internal Market; Telecommunications; Energy; Research; Employment and Social Policy; Transport; Environment; Health and Consumer Policy; Education and Culture.
9. The month of August was dropped for all years and policy areas because of a negligible number of meetings owing to the holiday season.
10. National manifesto data suffer from the same problems of comparability outlined in the text as Presidency programmes (e.g., Gemenis 2012). In addition, Party manifestos for national elections (Warntjen 2007) or national executive speeches outlining government priorities (Alexandrova and Timmermans 2013) present agendas for national policy-making, not priorities for what the government would like to achieve as part of its half-year Council Presidency term at the EU level. Measures based on those sources might suffer less from endogeneity problems. Yet, they are at best indirect proxies for the concept to be measured and, as such, are likely to be affected by systematic measurement error. Finally, speeches tend to be more selective than manifestos. Indeed, Presidency presentations of their work programmes to the European Parliament do not mention certain major topics at all (Warntjen 2007). Therefore, the discussion in the text is focused on Presidency work programmes as the source most likely to produce valid priority data.
11. As explained above, the month of August has been dropped because of the lack of any significant meeting activity during that month.
12. See Table A1 in the Online Appendix for the complete numerical estimation results from the mixed effects regressions.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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