Cooperation and Negotiation in the Council of the European Union

Results from the 2018 telephone interview survey with member state representatives to Council preparatory bodies

Markus Johansson, Daniel Naurin and Rutger Lindahl

Centre for European Research (CERGU)
University of Gothenburg
Box 711, SE 405 30 GÖTEBORG
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Dr. Markus Johansson
Prof. Dr. Daniel Naurin
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Motivation

Between April and July 2018, a telephone interview survey with member state representatives to Council preparatory bodies was conducted from the University of Gothenburg. The survey is part of a long-term research project that studies cooperation and negotiations in the EU Council of Ministers. The survey in 2018 was the sixth triennial survey conducted since 2003. Over these fifteen years the European Union has undergone dramatic changes in terms of its membership, but also in the basis for cooperation, as laid down in the treaties. During the past ten years, the EU has been ridden by crises, and the latest survey was conducted at a time when in particular the Brexit negotiations were high on the political agenda in the EU. Negotiations about the withdrawal agreement were ongoing, but had not yet reached the final phase. Brexit has important ramifications for the survey round in 2018, as it provides challenges as well as opportunities for the cooperation between the remaining 27 member states. The survey offers unique possibilities to study the cooperation between EU member states in the Council in these specific circumstances.

The survey method that we apply, in which we ask member states’ representatives about their perceptions of negotiation practices and cooperation patterns, complement other scholarly accounts that build on other types of data, such as observations, in-depth interviews, data on member states’ positions and negotiation outcomes, voting records and other official documentation. Using the results from the survey, and putting them in relation to results from studies using a variety of other sources, provide possibilities to build a more coherent and reliable understanding of the functioning of the Council. The data that has been gathered in the previous five rounds of the survey has resulted in a number of academic publications (for a selection see Table 1). In addition to this, the data has informed analyses of several reports, and has been communicated to the public in various ways. The data gathered in 2018 will be used for academic publications during the coming years. Already now, the data from the survey conducted in 2018 has resulted in a report in Swedish for the Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (SIEPS) and a working paper. The range of topics covered in the publications listed below indicates how the data has been used to give insights into cooperation patterns and negotiation dynamics in the Council.

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Table 1. Selected publications by the research team based on the data from 2003-2018

Journal articles:


Books/chapters/reports:


Response rate

The telephone survey has been conducted since 2003, which means that the combined data from these survey rounds offers a time-series suitable for research. The reliability of the data depends on a high response rate, which we have been fortunate to receive in all six rounds. As seen in Table 2, we experienced a small downturn in the response rate in 2015, but this was restored in the 2018 round when we again reached over 80 % of our approached respondents. For social science research, this is a very high figure. We generally sense a positive attitude towards participating in the survey, and great interest in our findings, and we hope that this will continue also in the future.

In each survey round, we have contacted representatives from eleven of the Council’s preparatory bodies. The sample of groups has been fairly consistent over the years, covering both senior committees and working groups in a variety of policy areas. We have attempted to get one respondent from each member state within the groups, which means that the sample of respondents in 2018 was 308 (11 working groups/committees x 28 member states), of which 251 member state representatives participated in an interview. There are, however, always some variation in the participation rate between groups and member states. The number of respondents in 2018 varied among member states, from 7 (Italy, Finland, UK, Malta and Romania) to 11 (the Netherlands, Sweden, the Czech Republic and Slovenia), and in preparatory bodies from 18 (Working party on horizontal agricultural questions) to 27 (Economic Policy Committee).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>Response rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>79 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>84 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>87 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>84 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>73 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>81 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1344</td>
<td>81 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The high response rate, and the fact that we have targeted all member state representatives in a broad sample of preparatory bodies, give us ample possibilities to make comparative analyses across policy areas, member states and years. Comparative analyses are essential when seeking to explain cooperation and negotiations in the Council of the EU. Comparisons across member

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3 The preparatory bodies included have been mostly the same during the rounds in 2006, 2009, 2012, 2015 and 2018, including Coreper 1, Coreper 2, Political Security Committee (PSC), Special Committee on Agriculture (SCA), Economic Policy Committee (EPC), Politico-Military Group (PMG), Working Party on Tax Questions, Coordinating committee in the area of police and judicial cooperation in criminal matters (CATS), Working Party on Agricultural Questions (Working party on horizontal agricultural questions in 2018), Working Party on Competitiveness and Growth, and Working party on the Environment. In 2003, the Mashrek-Mahgreb working party and the Working party on Enlargement were included instead of the Working Party on Competitiveness and Growth and the Coordinating committee in the area of police and judicial cooperation in criminal matters (CATS).
states and policy areas are made, for example, in the recent journal article by Narisong Huhe, Daniel Naurin and Robert Thomson, and in Markus Johansson’s doctoral thesis from 2015. By repeating the survey every three years, it has also become increasingly fruitful to make comparisons between the different survey rounds, which for instance are made in the book chapters by Markus Johansson from 2018 and by Daniel Naurin and Rutger Lindahl from 2008. From the list of publications, it is also evident that the dataset that the survey has generated has led to international research collaboration, and co-authorship of journal articles. It has also proved useful for other scholars studying the Council\(^4\). In addition, the data has been used in several bachelor and master student theses written at the University of Gothenburg.

Findings: Member states’ network capital and cooperation patterns

The first telephone survey was conducted in 2003 and the last round was completed in 2018. During this period, covering fifteen years of European integration, the EU has changed dramatically. It has gone from a Union of 15 member states, to a Union of 28, from a focus mainly on market integration to deeper political integration, and from a period of relative stability to a period marked by cumulative crises. In particular the past ten years have been challenging, with the evolution of the Euro crisis, external crises and migration pressures, and most recently Brexit. During this time period we have continuously gathered data about cooperation and negotiations in the Council of ministers.

The questions that have been posed in our interviews have centred on cooperation and negotiation dynamics. Each survey round has used different questions, but one question on cooperation partners has been included in all six rounds: “Which member states do you most often cooperate with within your working group/committee in order to develop a common position?” As an individual survey item, this question is the one that has been most frequently analysed, and for which we also have the best opportunities to study changes over time. When we pose this question to the survey respondents, we only ask them to mention other member states, but not explicitly to rank them. In analysing our responses, we have interpreted the order in which member states are mentioned as an implicit ranking. This choice is based on the idea that the member state that a respondent cooperates most with is also the one that first comes to mind. Depending on the order in which different member states are mentioned, we have therefore assigned scores, starting with 10 points for the first member state that is mentioned, 9 points for the second member state, and so on\(^5\).

We have aggregated this data by summarizing the scores assigned to each of the member states each year, and divide this with the sum of scores delivered that year, resulting in a percentage of total scores assigned to each member state each year. This makes the figures comparable.


\(^5\) We have also made analyses where we do not use this implicit ranking, but instead assign one point to each member state that is mentioned, regardless of the order. This alternative specification is highly correlated with the ranking scores.
over time, and indicates how common it is that the different member states are mentioned as cooperation partners. Member states that are often mentioned as cooperation partners may have better possibilities to build alliances and gain access to and spread information, which are important assets when seeking to influence decisions. We refer to this as network capital. The member states’ network capital for the last three rounds of the interview survey is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Member states’ network capital in 2018, 2015 and 2012

![Graph showing member states' network capital in 2018, 2015, and 2012](image)

*Note:* The member states’ network capital is based on the survey question: “Which member states do you most often cooperate with within your working group/committee in order to develop a common position?” Member states are ordered based on their 2018 scores.

Over the years, we have observed a high degree of stability with regard to the network capital that the different member states enjoy. This means that some member states are consistently more often mentioned as cooperation partners. The 2018 survey is in line with this finding, except for the network capital of the UK. In the 2018 round we observe a steep decrease in network capital for the UK in the Council, amounting to a loss of around 50% compared to 2015. This means that the UK has lost its standing in the Council, where they previously have been on a par with Germany and the France at the top of the ranking of member states’ network
capital. In 2018, the UK is the twelfth member state in the ranking, but still at the same level as other large member states such as Italy and Spain. This change for the UK has also left Germany and France alone in the top of the ranking of member states, with a marked distance to the other member states. In addition, we can observe a somewhat strengthened role for the Visegrad countries over time, who are now all placed in the top ten ranking of member states.

In Figure 1, we saw that Germany and France are located at the top when the member states are ranked according to their network capital, while we find many of the smaller member states at the lower end of the ranking. In figure 2, we illustrate this relation between network capital and member state population size more in detail. The population size of member states can also be understood as an asset in decision-making, in that it affects the voting power of the member states when the Council takes decisions by Qualified Majority Voting (QMV). In Figure 2, we illustrate the correlation between population size and network capital in 2018. There are several small and medium sized member states with higher network capital than their size and formal voting power would suggest, and also some member states with lower network capital than their size would suggest.

Figure 2. Relation between member states’ population sizes and their network capital in 2018

Note: The member states’ network capital is based on the survey question: “Which member states do you most often cooperate with within your working group/committee in order to develop a common position?” Population sizes are displayed as percentages of the total EU population and gathered from the Council’s rules of procedure (ST 14966/2017 INIT).
Another way of analysing the same survey question on cooperation partners in the Council is to use dimensional analyses in order to study cooperation patterns. In Figure 3, we illustrate the cooperation patterns in 2015 and 2018 in the left and right hand panels respectively. Figure 3 can be read as a distance map, where a smaller distance between two member states indicates closer cooperation. The dimensions derived with this type of analysis have no inherent substantial meaning, but the figure should rather be understood as providing a rough estimation of which member states that have strong cooperative ties to one another.

Figure 3. Cooperation patterns in the Council 2015 and 2018

Some conclusions can be drawn from the patterns in Figure 3. The primary ones are that cooperation patterns are stable over time, but also that they follow an overall geographical pattern separating a northern, a southern and an eastern group of member states. Similar geographical cooperation patterns have been seen in all survey rounds, although in 2003 only represented by a north-south division. This geographical pattern of states is found also in other studies of member state clustering in the Council, using voting data and positional data. Geography is not an explanatory factor in itself, but is rather a proxy for other factors, such as similar interests, values and priorities among the member states. It may also be influenced by

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social, linguistic and cultural similarities that follows the geographical patterns. We can expect that when the UK has left the EU, the remaining northern member states will sense a need to redirect their attention to fill the void.