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The rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU – Still an agenda-setter?

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Abstract
What role does the rotating Council Presidency maintain a decade after Lisbon? This article argues that, regardless of institutional changes, the rotating Presidency still shapes the Council agenda to a large extent. Based on an original hand-coded dataset of rotating Presidency programmes between 1997 and 2017, I show that some policies are 'stickier' on the Council agenda, while the others exhibit significant changes in salience over time. Since the magnitude of these shifts varies from Presidency to Presidency, the analysis focuses on domestic political factors and the country position- ing vis-à-vis the European Union to determine their relationship with agenda volatility. By means of a panel model, the examination demonstrates that the government issue salience can best explain the levels of issue salience in the Presidency programmes.

Keywords
Agenda-setting, Council of the European Union, issue salience, rotating Presidency

Introduction

The roles of the rotating Council Presidency are often framed in terms of the agenda-setting powers the chair holds. The recent institutional changes, including

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the establishment of the Trio Presidency, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, as well as the Eurogroup President, limited the powers of the rotating chair in respective policy areas, which added up to the transfer of the European Council chairmanship to the appointed President (Bunse and Klein, 2012; Dinan, 2013; Puetter, 2014). Although these changes lowered the influence of individual Presidencies, rotating chairs remain responsible for the legislative activity (Batory and Puetter, 2013). Furthermore, Häge (2017) and Warntjen (2013) have argued that even in the post-Lisbon period countries are able to leave a national imprint in the Council's work. Building on this literature, this article analyses whether the rotating Presidency agendas exhibit changes in salience across issue areas.

The agenda of each Presidency is inevitably affected by multiple factors, such as the legislative dossiers inherited from its predecessors, the agendas of the Trio Presidency, the European Council and the European Commission's own priorities and the pressure exerted by external events. Nevertheless, when drafting its agenda, the rotating chair reassesses the importance of each dossier (General Secretariat, 2015), which provides the member state with the opportunity to shuffle and perhaps advance proposals in line with its own national priorities. Therefore, I expect the shifts across rotating Presidency agendas to be influenced by the salience of issues for the government holding the rotating Presidency, as well as by country-specific policy priorities and partisan political preferences. Hence, this article focuses on the extent to which national factors and country position vis-à-vis the European Union (EU) shape the Presidency's agenda, irrespective of supranational and exogenous factors.

Testing these expectations, the study makes use of an original, hand-coded dataset of 40 rotating Presidency programmes released between 1997 and 2017. The resulting panel dataset, once augmented with information on domestic factors of interest, is analysed by means of panel model estimations. In the article, I present the estimates from a general linear model adapted for panel data, following Krauser et al. (2019). A dynamic panel model and a classical fixed-effects model are reported in the Online appendix as a robustness check. The study assesses the extent to which some features of presiding countries (such as the government salience or political orientations, and the long-term interests of a given country) find their way into the rotating Presidency programmes. I show that among those, especially government issue salience contributes to determining which fields are prioritised by the Council Presidencies – notwithstanding the relevance of supranational factors. These results are stable across all estimators, suggesting that the main findings are robust.

This study contributes to the literature on the EU agendas and paves the way for future research, in particular, to focus on both national and supranational factors influencing the agendas not only of the Presidency but also other EU institutions. The results presented in this article suggest that even though the attention dedicated to national priorities of the government holding the rotating chair has possibly decreased since the Treaty of Lisbon, domestic considerations

still shape EU policymaking. Other European institutions should take this into account when drafting their own agendas.

Theoretical accounts on the EU agenda

Policy agendas have long been in the limelight of cross-country scientific research. In the majority of cases, long-term dynamics are addressed by employing the punctuated equilibrium theory (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005), which assumes that policymakers tend to address the most important issues. However, due to the so-called bottleneck problem, only a set of them are tackled at a time, which – accordingly – leads to punctuations in issue attention (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). These theoretical lenses, often used in country-specific studies, can also be applied to EU institutions. Since European integration led to more powers being conferred to supranational bodies, today the EU deals with a large number of issues simultaneously. Hence, the main goal of policy actors is often not to put an issue on the EU agenda, but rather to prioritise it (Princen, 2009).[1] While during the ministerial debates, formally, any country is equally capable of addressing important issues and proposing new solutions, a member state holding the rotating chair possesses more room for manoeuvre, especially in terms of agenda-shaping activities (Tallberg, 2003).

Rotating Presidency as an agenda-setter

Although agenda-setting, in broad terms,[2] is not formally included in the Presidency duties, in the pre-Lisbon era, it was related to both political leadership, which concerns steering the Council debates, as well as organising and brokering negotiations, as a part of agenda management and mediation (e.g. Quaglia and Moxon-Browne, 2006; Schout, 1998; Schout and Vanhoonacker, 2006). Since 2009, the political leadership function was transferred to the elected president of the European Council (Batory and Puetter, 2013). However, the rotating chair is still responsible for the organisation and mediation of Council activities, which implies certain agenda-shaping powers (e.g. Häge, 2017; Warntjen, 2013).

Applying Tallberg's (2003) typology, agenda-shaping can be disentangled as follows: (a) agenda-setting (as an introduction of issues on the agenda), (b) agenda-structuring, and (c) agenda exclusion. The first category relates to attaching an emphasis to issues which were not previously discussed in the Council or developing certain proposals (usually together with the European Commission) (Tallberg, 2003). The second category presents the chair's discretion in determining the frequency of meetings and setting their actual agendas, or, alternatively, convening informal meetings (Tallberg, 2003), which normally do not result in official conclusions. Agenda-exclusion, accordingly, presents the Presidency's ability to exclude certain issues from the agenda, to remain silent on them or to propose unacceptable deals for the other countries (Tallberg, 2003). Thus, the Presidency may accelerate the negotiations on certain legislative initiatives, to concentrate the

Council's attention on particular topics or to stall the process (Warntjen, 2007). The rotating Presidencies have a rather common practice on how to lead the Council debates. This involves asking for an approval of either '(a) a legislative proposal presented by the European Commission; (b) the Council state of play on a proposal (e.g. a presidency compromise proposal, negotiations at lower bureaucratic levels); or (c) the state of negotiations with the European Parliament (EP) (e.g. a presidency's mandate for negotiations with the EP)' (Wratil and Hobolt, 2019: 515).

The establishment of the Presidency Trios in the Council's rules of procedure (Council of the EU, 2006) and the following transfer of the European Council chairmanship to the appointed President (Treaty of Lisbon, 2007) substantially limited the rotating Presidency's powers in introducing new issues on the Council agenda. Therefore, this study focuses exclusively on agenda-structuring powers of the rotating Presidency, as a way to emphasise or de-emphasise policies the Council is engaged with. In doing so, this article contributes to the interpretation of the Presidency's agenda management powers in the post-Lisbon period by analysing the trends in salience attached to issues over a 20-year period, from 1997 to 2017.

It should be pointed out that issue areas tend to include a number of sub-topics, which accordingly could show some more nuanced variation in the levels of salience. Nevertheless, the purpose of this study is to provide a more general account of the rotating Council Presidency agendas over time, as well as to define the factors of influence across major issue areas. In doing so, the study opens up the possibility of performing a more in-depth, within-issue area analysis in the future.

The rotating Presidency's agenda: Factors of influence

There are multiple factors that might influence the content of the rotating Presidency agenda. Since this study investigates the main differences across Presidency programmes and therefore between member states holding the office, the focus is on domestic political factors as well the country position vis-à-vis the EU, and their impact on the Presidency agendas.

The drafting process of the Presidency programmes is rather lengthy and may take several years (Elgström and Tallberg, 2003). The preparation involves all ministries, as well as domestic agencies or even societal actors, each of them putting forward their own priorities. The aggregation of these preferences and the general coordination of the Presidency agenda are usually managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Prime Minister's office (Elgström and Tallberg, 2003). One may argue that due to different national EU coordination systems, the drafting process might yield divergencies in the final Presidency programme. This point remains an open question, since scholarly works (see e.g. Jensen (2014), Kassim (2003)) analyse the coordination structures on a regular basis, and not during the Presidency terms. This is an important issue, since

during their six months in office, rotating chairs tend to increase their resources and to optimise their inter-ministerial structures in order to ensure smooth information flows between institutional structures. Hence, there is a substantial difference between management capacity that is required for regular coordination purposes versus during the Presidency term (Schout, 1998). Consequently, established coordination structures are not further considered in this study.

Regardless of the differences in preparation for the Presidency semester, rotating Presidency programmes tend to have a rather similar structure. Already before the Treaty of Lisbon, programmes had parts addressing a political declaration and priorities, as well as agendas for separate Councils. They were even more unified starting from 2009. The first part of the programme presents a strategic framework, specifying core objectives, while the second part – the operational programme – expresses certain priorities in each of the Council configurations for the upcoming period (Van Hecke and Bursens, 2011). Furthermore, the Presidency is compelled to issue the timetable of the meetings at least seven months in advance (General Secretariat, 2015). Such requirements became even stricter after the establishment of the Trio Presidency and 18-month agenda, providing the boundaries within which each rotating Presidency can act (General Secretariat, 2015). Therefore, although rotating Presidency programmes are considered to be political statements of their national administrations, which take full responsibility for their content (General Secretariat, 2016), the planned activities clearly express their preliminary work agenda in each of the Council configurations.[3] Accordingly, the similarity in their structure allows for further comparisons.

According to Tallberg (2006), the 'unwritten rule' of Presidency programmes is to fit Council policies into the general EU lines of action. To a large extent, the content of the Presidency's agenda is inherited from the previous chairs. Yet, the six-month programme provides leeway for each member state to shape the ministerial agenda. For instance, one can observe the inclusion of sub-topics on the agenda that would otherwise not appear on the programme of another Presidency (Tallberg, 2006). Such trends over time would produce policy punctuations in salience attached to topics. To determine the extent to which such phenomena are still present, I analyse long-term trends in issue attention across 40 rotating Council Presidencies. I thereby examine whether rotating Presidency agendas exhibit attention shifts across issue areas regardless of the institutional rules, and if so, what their main drivers at the national level are.

Incumbent government at the time of the rotating Presidency. At the national level, salience is often related to issues that are essential for the government or the country as such (Bickerton et al., 2015). Hence, the government acts as a key agent that aggregates societal preferences and represents them accordingly (Leuffen et al., 2014).

> *H1:* The higher the issue salience for the incumbent government, the higher the issue salience in the rotating Presidency programme.

This hypothesis is driven by the fact that the content of the rotating Presidency programme is highly influenced by the incumbent government and issues at stake. Hence, observing the same member states assuming the Presidency at different points in time would show diverging levels of salience attached to different policies.

Ideological preferences, on the other hand, also shape issue ranking. The ideological position of the government is essential in the EU decision-making process (Aspinwall, 2002, 2007). Left-wing governments are expected to be more inclined to emphasise social or environmental policies (Hooghe et al., 2002; Warntjen, 2007), whereas the right-wing governments focus on market integration (Hooghe et al., 2002) or industry (Warntjen, 2007).

Furthermore, it is plausible that left and right governments put different weights on the coordination of actions at EU level. Given the fact that right-wing governments are more focused on the national dimension (Mattila, 2004), it is likely that they would not give as much importance to issues at the EU level (i.e. the rotating Presidency programmes) as left-wing or centre governments. Nevertheless, it is important to note that examining this hypothesis does not address pro- or anti-EU positions, but rather the main differences between governments issuing Presidency programmes.

> *H2a:* The more right-wing the government ideology, the lower the expected salience of policies in the Presidency programme.

It is, however, unlikely that left- or right-wing ideologies translate in the overall increase in salience across all policy fields. Instead, it is plausible that governments on the left or on the right prioritise different policy areas. In particular, it is likely that left-wing governments attach more salience to issues associated with the key policy areas of their domestic platforms, namely civil rights, employment, environment and social protection (Seeberg, 2017) – I identify these areas as the 'social and environmental' policy cluster. Conversely, right-wing governments are likely to attach more salience to issues associated with the key policy areas of their own constituencies, namely migration (Carvalho and Ruedin, 2018), defence, internal market and international trade (Seeberg, 2017) – identified as the 'economic and security' policy cluster.

> *H2b:* Left-wing governments will attach more salience than right-wing governments to policy areas in the social and environmental cluster.
> *H2c:* Right-wing governments will attach more salience than left-wing governments to policy areas in the economic and security cluster.

Contributions to the EU budget. According to Moravcsik (1998), economic factors play an important role when shaping national preferences. In particular, the Council of the EU is the arena where differences in the economic status of the member states represent the key cleavages across countries. While the richer EU

members (i.e. net contributors to the EU budget) favour deregulation, net-recipients tend to support redistributive policies (Bailer et al., 2015). Such socioeconomic interests eventually lead to divergent voting patterns between net recipients and net contributors (Bailer et al, 2015).

Redistributive policies, and especially the net transfers received by single member states, were considered as important factors shaping country preferences (Aspinwall, 2007; Copsey and Haughton, 2009). Copsey and Haughton (2009) argue that funds received from the EU often reflect the weaknesses of the countries. Following such a line of reasoning, one would expect that member states are more inclined to support policies which compensate their national shortcomings. Thus, higher levels of salience are expected to be attached to them.

H3: Net recipients attach a higher salience to issues than net contributors.

Geographic position. Along with economic issues, geopolitical factors are often considered as important elements, to a certain extent influencing national preferences of the EU member states (Moravcsik, 1998). A geographic position not only shapes country's regional policy priorities but also inter-connects with its foreign policy and security issues. For instance, regarding the enlargement or neighbourhood policies, countries tend to support cooperation with states that are in close proximity (Elgström, 2003). This could be illustrated by two branches of the EU neighbourhood policy: Eastern Partnership and Southern Partnership. Depending on the geographic position of the EU member, a country holding the Presidency emphasises either Eastern Partnership (e.g. Poland) or Southern Partnership (e.g. Italy) in its working programme (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011; Italian Presidency of the Council of the EU, 2014).

This geographic proximity is also invoked for influencing the EU agenda through so-called groups of *like-minded countries*. For instance, Nordic countries use this group for addressing common positions on development and gender issues (Elgström, 2017), as well as environmental policy (Liefferink and Andersen, 1998) at the EU level. Although in the majority of cases these networks are informal (Elgström, 2017) and even correspond to the geographic position, it would be difficult to assess each of the groupings across all policy areas examined in this study.

Regarding the intra-EU dimension of geographic positioning, some scholars (e.g. Thomson et al., 2004) have underlined geographical cleavages such as the North–South divide. To a large extent, this clustering overlaps with the division between net contributors and net recipients (Zimmer et al., 2005), as well as countries that diverge across market-driven or regulatory strategies toward EU policies (Thomson et al., 2004). Nevertheless, after the 2004 enlargement, the traditional North–South divide is no longer sufficient. Although on the basis of financial transfers received, the Eastern European member states could be grouped with Southern countries, geographical differences and regional policies point out

distinct priorities. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, a triple typology is applied, clustering EU Presidencies to North-Western, Southern and Central–Eastern states, the latter also representing members that joined the EU in the past 16 years. More precisely, it is expected that Central–Eastern European countries will attach higher salience to defence and energy ('security' cluster) than North-Western or Southern countries. This expectation is driven by the assumption that security constitutes a key national interest of new member states (see, e.g. Pomorska and Vanhoonacker, 2012; Vilpišauskas, 2014). Similarly, Southern European countries are expected to attach more salience to regional and social protection policies ('redistributive' cluster), insofar as they prefer a more redistributive approach to European policy (Bailer et al., 2015; Zimmer et al., 2005). For the same reason, Southern countries are expected to avoid putting employment policies on the agenda, insofar as the European employment strategy has been mostly concerned with extending Western labour market flexibilization policies to the considerably less flexible Southern labour markets (see e.g. Barbieri and Scherer, 2009). Finally, North-Western European countries are expected to attach more salience to policies concerned with a combination of liberal and post-material issues (Caughey et al., 2019), such as civil rights, environment and trade liberalisation policies (Zimmer et al., 2005) ('green, alternative, libertarian (GAL)' cluster).

> *H4:* Compared to other groups, Central–Eastern European countries attach more salience to policy areas in the security cluster, Southern European countries to policies in the redistributive cluster, and North-Western European countries to policies in the GAL cluster.

Additional factors. The literature has identified several additional factors, both domestic and supranational, that are likely to influence salience. The most important domestic factor not yet introduced is public opinion. Although one might expect the European governments to be less concerned with public opinion when it comes to international or supranational decision-making (as the complexity of supranational institutional structures lowers national governments' accountability), recent studies (Hagemann et al., 2017; Wratil, 2019) provide evidence of the opposite. If European integration becomes a salient issue at the domestic level, polarising the party system, then public priorities are much more reflected in the Council negotiations, usually leading to increased controversy between member states when adopting EU legislation (Hagemann et al., 2017). Unfortunately, due to data limitations,[4] the analysis falls short of providing a full test of the effects of public opinion.

Beyond public opinion, other factors certainly play a role. Presidency agendas are not drafted in a vacuum. To a large extent, member states need to address common priorities of the EU member states, often considered as inherited items on the agenda – these effects are captured through econometric modelling.

Furthermore, macroeconomic factors (e.g. crises the EU faces at a certain moment in time, or agendas of supranational EU institutions) similarly affect the content of the six-month programme. While this piece focuses on domestic political factors (government ideology and issue salience), as well as country position vis-à-vis the EU (contributions to the EU budget and geographical positioning), I certainly do not deny the fact that supranational institutions and external events might play a role as well and should be addressed in further research.

Data

Measuring issue salience across rotating Council Presidencies

I use half-year work programmes introduced at the beginning of each term to operationalise the rotating Presidency's agenda. These documents are often considered as the first information source and one of the best proxies for member states' priorities for the upcoming term (Elgström, 2003; Häge, 2017; Tallberg, 2003; Warntjen, 2007), naming crucial policies and activities planned. In addition, they are prepared by the national administrations and seen as their political statements, taking all the responsibility for the content (General Secretariat, 2016). While analysing the Presidency agendas, the study focuses on salience attached to different issue areas, disregarding the position on the issue *per se*. Since salience often induces debates due to the complexity of its concept, for the purpose of this research, rotating Presidency issue salience (i.e. the dependent variable of this study) is expressed by a degree of emphasis (percentage of references, or quasi-sentences) given to a topic (Laver, 2001) in the rotating Presidency programme. To operationalise the dependent variable, 40 rotating Presidency programmes were coded, covering the period from 1997 until 2017.[5] This study employs a hand-coding approach,[6] following the methodology of the EU Policy Agendas Project (EUPAP, 2016 – see the Online appendix for more information). One of the key features of documents, such as programmes or speeches, is the symbolic meaning without policy content (Breeman et al., 2009; Jennings et al., 2011; Mortensen et al., 2011). To capture and exclude it from the analysis, seven categories of quasi-sentences were introduced,[7] which resulted in omitting approximately 21% of the content of the Presidency programmes (see the Online appendix for a more elaborated explanation).

In presenting the actual differences across the agendas of the rotating member states, two indicators are introduced. The 'percentage-percentage method' (Alexandrova et al., 2012: 76; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005) is used to account for relative changes in issue attention across Presidency semesters, and, hereby, to denote major punctuations across issue areas. To evaluate (in)stability of the rotating agendas, a reversed issue divergence index is calculated. This indicator demonstrates the extent to which the content of the programme in one semester differs from the programme in the subsequent semester (Carammia et al., 2016). For formulas used to compute each of the indices, see the Online appendix.

Measuring the key factors of influence

The four country-specific factors of influence presented in the previous section are of two different categories. Two factors (government issue salience, government ideology) refer to the domestic characteristics of individual member states, while the remaining two (budget contributions and a geographic position) are attributes of groups of member states and their position vis-à-vis the EU. Government issue salience is operationalised through the Manifesto Project Dataset (version 2016b) (Volkens et al., 2016). Salience of each issue is (a) calculated separately for each party in government at the time of the Presidency and (b) weighted proportionally to the seats the government party received in the most recent elections. For evaluating the association between government issue salience and Presidency issue salience, codes defining issue areas in separate datasets were matched accordingly.[8]

Government ideology is operationalised by employing the Parliaments and governments (ParlGov) database (Döring and Manow, 2016). Hereby, left-right scores for the governments are weighed according to the number of seats each government party won in the last election before the rotating Presidency term. The main difference from the former variable is that the operationalisation of the government issue salience allows to perform an issue-level analysis, while the government ideology presents an overall ideological direction of the government (which is important when analysing coalition governments).

For the contributions to the EU budget, countries are grouped into two corresponding categories (net contributors and net recipients), on the basis of financial figures and reports produced by the European Commission (European Commission, 2008, 2017, 2018). For the geographical position, countries are clustered based on the official geographical grouping presented by the United Nations (UNSD, 2017), and the 2004 enlargement.

The variations in issue salience across rotating Presidencies

Since the Council of the EU is the arena for the member states to represent their interests, it is of no surprise that the rotating Presidency programmes exhibit the cross-country differences. In this regard, Figure 1 presents evident fluctuations of salience given to different issue areas across the examined 20-year period.

Ten prevailing issue areas which, on average, gained the biggest share of attention in the rotating Presidency programmes, are international affairs and foreign aid (17.24%), macroeconomics (8.04%), banking, finance and internal trade (7.68%), law and crime (7.21%), environment (5.82%), EU governance (5.80%), defence (5.13%), immigration (5.09%), agriculture and fisheries (4.74%) and space, science, technology and communication (4.51%). In total, they make up to 70% of issue space on the agenda, leaving one-third for the remaining 11 issue areas.

While absolute numbers in attention paid to issue areas provide a more general picture of salient topics for the Presidencies, the relative changes show the
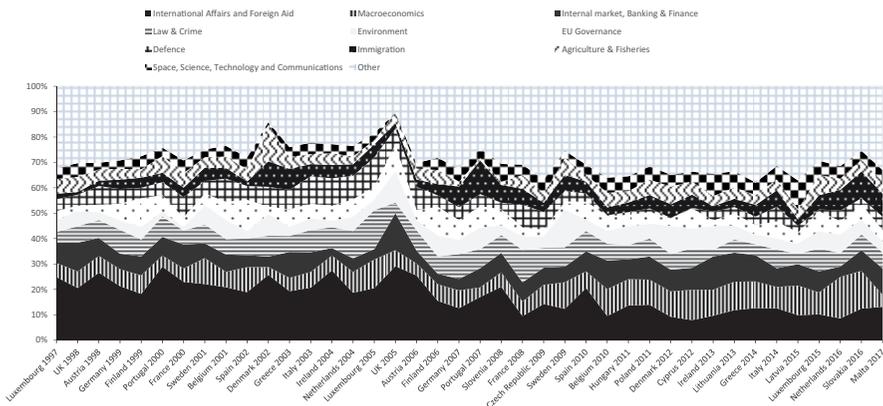
Figure 1. Variation of salience (%, absolute numbers) across rotating Council Presidencies by issue area.

magnitude of these fluctuations. The Online appendix shows that fluctuations are not equally distributed throughout the period under analysis. On the one hand, this may be related to institutional changes or external affairs the EU was involved at a certain point in time. On the other hand, peaks could also reflect the representation of domestically sensitive issues. In fact, actual shifts are clustered in some policy areas. Macroeconomics, international relations or European governance issues were the dominant topics on the agenda, yet relative changes across Presidency agendas were low (similarly to the European Council Conclusions (Alexandrova et al., 2012)). On the contrary, social, trade or defence policies exhibit the main peaks throughout the examined period. These results are in line with the punctuated equilibrium theory, stating that abrupt shifts occur only in some cases, whereas the other issues tend to be 'sticky' on the agenda (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005).

Figure 2 presents issue divergence across rotating Council Presidencies, denoting the extent to which the content of the programmes (in terms of salience attached to policy areas) differs across sequential semesters. The results show that, on average, programmes differ by approximately 29%. It is important to note that higher differences across programmes can be observed after 2006, when the Trio Presidency was established. Therefore, one may assume that formal institutional rules, including the Trio programmes, have accounted for the national differences by creating some room of manoeuvre for the chair. On the other hand, it may also be due to the different circumstances the presiding countries were facing (e.g. Euro or migration crises). Nonetheless, this result corroborates Häge's (2017) finding that the Presidency agendas differ up to 30% in terms of salience attached to the topics.
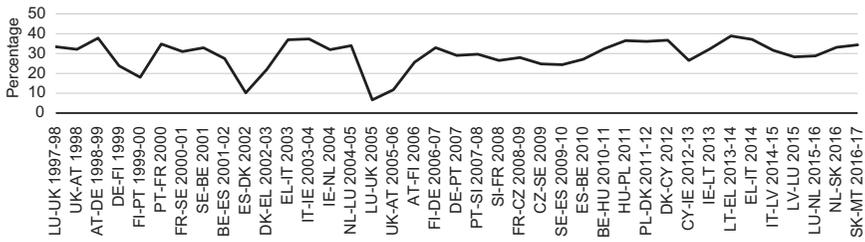
Figure 2. Issue divergence across rotating Council Presidencies.

National factors of influence on Presidency programmes

The analysis begins by looking at factors associated with governmental and country-specific features. This allows to test *H1* on government salience, *H2a* on the overall impact of ideology and *H3* on the overall impact of the net position vis-à-vis the EU budget. For this purpose, I rely on the full sample without the need to differentiate between policy clusters. By contrast, *H2b-c* and *H4* are specific to certain policy areas. For *H2b-c* and *H4*, the analysis proceeds with splitting the sample across policy areas, and consequently assessing the differentiated impact of ideology and geographical position in different fields.

Estimating the relationship between Presidency salience and country-specific factors

Presidency issue salience in the Council programmes is arguably a 'sticky' variable, given that its value at a given moment in time depends, in part, on its value in the previous period. The dynamic nature of this dependent variable needs to be captured by the analytical model adopted. The structure of the dataset emulates a classic panel model: 18 specific policy fields constitute the groups of the panel, whose salience varies across 40 time periods (20 years of Presidency semesters). To complicate the modelling structure further, the dependent variable (Presidency issue salience) is best treated as a fractional term, insofar as it varies between the constraining boundaries of 0 and 100. Given these constraints, only a handful of models can provide reliable estimates. To the best of my knowledge, proper fractional dynamic panel models have not yet been fully developed. Alternatives include the Arellano–Bond estimator, as well as a generalised linear model (GLM) adapted for panel estimates of a fractional dependent variable (Krauser et al., 2019). While the Arellano–Bond estimator allows a proper inclusion of lagged dependent variables, it suffers from issues in dealing with datasets where the number of time periods is larger than the number of groups, such as in the specific case at hand. A third alternative would be to, instead, opt for an error correction model (ECM), whereby long-term, stationary effects of predictors are accompanied by short-term effects over the trend, as applied in some published agenda studies (e.g. Bevan and Rasmussen, 2020; Jennings, 2009).

For the purpose of this study, the modelling strategy of Krauser et al. (2019: 225) is applied adapting a GLM to accommodate both the fractional nature of the dependent variable as well as the panel nature of the dataset. Hence, the baseline model (Model A1) fits the panel regression reported in the equation below, where the panel dimension p identifies 18 different policy areas, and the time dimension t identifies 40 Presidencies.

$$
\begin{aligned}
Presidency\ salience_{p,t} = \ &\beta_0 + \beta_1 * government\ salience_{p,t} \\
&+ \beta_2 * ideological\ placement_t + \beta_3 * net\ recipient\ country_t \\
&+ \beta_4 * geographical\ position_t + \beta_5 * mean_{p,t} + \varepsilon_{p,t}
\end{aligned}
$$

In the baseline model, *Presidency salience* indicates the level of salience in the Presidency programme of a given policy area p during Presidency t, *government salience* identifies the salience for the government of policy area p, *ideological placement* captures the placement of the government on the left/right scale, *net recipient country* is a binary variable identifying countries as either net recipient or net contributors to the EU budget, *geographical position* classifies countries as either Central–Eastern, Southern, or North-Western Europe, and ε is the error term. I also include the *mean* at Presidency t, policy p of the main explanatory variable of interest, government salience, to model the panel structure of the data as recommended by Papke and Wooldridge (2008) and Krauser et al. (2019).[9] Similarly, given the fractional nature of the dependent variable, the equation is fit using a fractional model with a logit link (Krauser et al., 2019).

To test the robustness of the estimator, an alternative model is presented. Since the work on the indicative agendas for each Council configuration starts about a year in advance (General Secretariat, 2015), Model A2 augments Model A1 by including the lagged values of Presidency issue salience two semesters prior the Presidency takes place (see Table 1).

Overall, results are consistent across two estimators. In particular, the main variable of interest concerning *H1* – government salience – is statistically significant at the 10% level (in Model A1) and 5% level (in Model A2), respectively, and is positively associated with the Presidency issue salience. That said, the results suggest that while the effect of government salience corresponds to the expectation, it is, however, feeble and smaller than the effect attributable to the level of salience inherited by the previous Presidencies. This presents weak, but positive evidence in support of *H1* regarding the effect of government salience. In contrast, no evidence in support of government ideology (*H2a*) was found: the general ideology of the government does not seem to affect the Presidency salience significantly across policy fields. Therefore, *H2a* is confidently rejected. Finally, the hypothesis on the effect attributable to net-recipient countries (*H3*) is also rejected. The Online appendix presents two alternative estimations: a dynamic panel model and a fixed effects model. Their results align with those of the GLM models, showing that the

Table 1. Estimation of the influence of national factors on the Presidency agenda.

	Model A1	Model A2
	GLM estimator, Presidency salience (fractional 0–1); no lags	GLM estimator, Presidency salience (fractional 0–1); 2 lags
Government salience	0.014*	0.012**
	(0.008)	(0.006)
Government left/right placement	−0.003	−0.005
	(0.021)	(0.014)
Government salience (mean)	−0.016	−0.004
	(0.011)	(0.008)
Net recipient country	−0.008	0.024
	(0.076)	(0.049)
Southern country	−0.009	0.018
	(0.089)	(0.053)
Central–Eastern country	−0.024	0.039
	(0.083)	(0.054)
Presidency salience$_{t-1}$		5.645***
		(0.596)
Presidency salience$_{t-2}$		5.039***
		(0.659)
Constant	−2.794***	−3.573***
	(0.122)	(0.082)
N	680	646

GLM: generalised linear model.
Note: $*p < 0.1$; $**p < 0.05$; $***p < 0.01$; standard errors in parentheses.

government salience is positively associated with issue salience in the Presidency programme.

Differentiations across policy fields

After having assessed the presence of an overall effect of government salience across policy fields, the analysis continues examining differentiated effects between clusters of policy fields to test *H2b* and *H2c* (government ideological placement), and *H4* (geography). In doing so, the analysis starts from the baseline Model A2 – a two-lags GLM. Five iterations of the model are run, for each of specific clusters of policies (see Table 2). Models B1 and B2 look at how government ideology affects Presidency salience differently in certain policy clusters. Models B3–B5, instead, look at the role of geographical positioning.

Models B1 and B2 provide a test for *H2b-c* regarding the effect attributable to government ideological placement. Against the expectations, no effect of left/right ideology is found when looking at subsamples of (a) social and environmental

Table 2. GLM estimations across policy groups.

	Model B1	Model B2	Model B3	Mode B4	Model B5
	GLM estimator, two lags, social and environmental cluster	GLM estimator, two lags, economic and security cluster	GLM estimator, two lags, security cluster	GLM estimator, two lags, redistributive cluster	GLM estimator, two lags, GAL cluster
Presidency salience$_{t-1}$	4.862***	7.130***	6.977***	12.741*	5.237***
	(1.615)	(1.722)	(2.802)	(7.566)	(1.776)
Presidency salience$_{t-2}$	5.631***	2.777*	4.612	7.581	6.781***
	(1.426)	(1.570)	(3.456)	(9.776)	(1.670)
Government salience	0.054***	−0.010	0.040	−0.032	0.054***
	(0.016)	(0.015)	(0.042)	(0.065)	(0.018)
Government left/right placement	0.010	−0.027	0.072	−0.047	−0.020
	(0.034)	(0.025)	(0.064)	(0.060)	(0.038)
Government salience (mean)	−0.098***	0.044**			−0.076***
	(0.022)	(0.022)			(0.021)
Net recipient country	−0.083	0.014	−0.043	0.022	−0.027
	(0.103)	(0.082)	(0.191)	(0.204)	(0.106)
Central–Eastern country			−0.495*		
			(0.265)		
Southern country				0.562**	
				(0.220)	
North-Western country					0.188*
					(0.106)
Constant	−3.349***	−3.393***	−3.920***	−4.262***	−3.578***
	(0.248)	(0.153)	(0.351)	(0.320)	(0.244)
N	114	152	38	38	114

GAL: green, alternative, libertarian; GLM: generalised linear model.
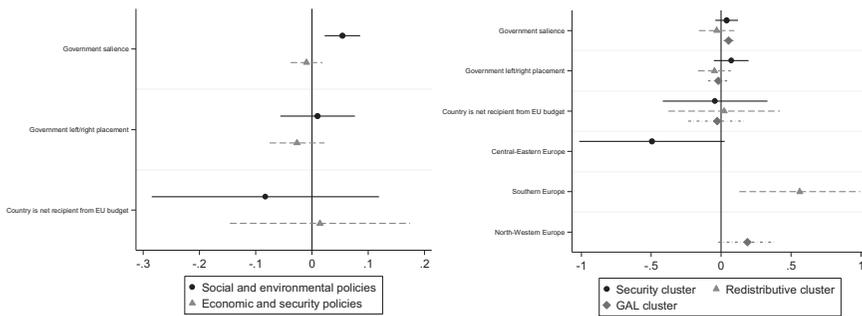Note: *$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$; standard errors in parentheses.

Figure 3. GLM estimations across policy groups. *Note*: 95% confidence interval.

cluster and (b) economic and security cluster. The results remain, in fact, statistically not significant (and, if anything, slightly negative). Therefore, these hypotheses can be rejected, suggesting that neither left-wing governments prioritise social and environmental policies, nor right-wing governments prioritise economic and security policies in the Presidency programmes. Interestingly, however, a differentiated effect of government salience can be detected, which turns out to have a larger effect in determining Presidency salience in the social and environmental policy subsample than in the economic and security policy subsample. In other words, government salience of traditional left-wing policies better translates into Presidency salience of social and environmental policies, than their right-wing policy counterparts. Since governments with left-wing ideology are more likely to score higher policy salience in left-wing policy areas (and the other way around), the results suggest that a mediated effect of ideology is somehow present. If ideology does not play an independent role, perhaps a geographical position does. To this end, *H4* is tested in models B3–B5.

Model B3 analyses whether Central–Eastern European countries attach more salience than others to the security cluster. Model B4 assesses whether Southern European countries attach more salience than others to redistributive policies, and Model B5 tests whether North-Western European countries attach more salience to the GAL policy cluster. These results are also reproduced graphically in Figure 3 for a better visualisation.

Contrary to the expectations raised, no evidence is found in support of the Central–Eastern European countries attaching higher salience to the security cluster. Nevertheless, *H4* is still largely supported: Southern European countries, more than other geographical groups, tend to attach higher salience to the redistributive policy cluster, while the North-Western European countries relatively favour the GAL policy cluster in the Presidency programmes. In sum, the results show that while the partisan ideology of the government seems not to matter when prioritising items in the Presidency programmes, the national interest generally appears to matter, at least when it comes to Southern and North-Western European countries.

Conclusions

The complex institutional nature of the Council of the EU and the obligations of the rotating chair require disentangling the agenda of ministerial-level decision-making. While the current state of the art mostly relies on case studies of the rotating Council Presidencies, this article takes a longitudinal approach in evaluating the agenda-setting capabilities of the rotating chair during the past two decades. In this regard, the introduction of the Trio Presidencies and the Treaty of Lisbon presented evident changes in the agenda dynamics. After the Treaty's entry into force, fluctuations in issue attention decreased, while the differences across Presidency agendas became less volatile.

This study examined four country-specific determinants, two being domestic political factors (issue salience and ideological views of the government in power), and two capturing the country positioning vis-à-vis the EU (contributions to the EU budget and geographical position of the member states). The results suggest that, besides inherited agenda, government issue salience is the key domestic factor influencing Presidency issue salience. The ideology of the government in power or the contributions to the EU budget do not have a direct effect on the salience attributed to policies in the rotating Presidency programme, even though they might be mediated by government salience. Instead, the country positioning vis-à-vis the EU seems to play a role: Southern European member states tend to emphasise regional and social policies, while the North-Western member states are more focused on liberal/post-materialist policies than countries in the other two groups.

Nevertheless, these results need to be interpreted with some caution. This piece explicitly takes into account country-specific factors, which, as the results suggest, are not sufficient to explain in full the differences across the Presidency programmes. In particular, the findings imply that the agendas of supranational actors, such as the European Council, the European Commission, the European Parliament and especially the agendas of the previous rotating Presidencies should be considered when analysing the content of the Council Presidency agendas. Exogenous events and crises may also disrupt the environmental conditions within which the Presidencies act. In addition, while government issue salience could work as a proxy for wider societal stances on certain issues, the existence of an independent effect of public opinion cannot be excluded ex ante. Unfortunately, due to substantial limitations on data availability, this issue should be unfolded in future work. Similarly, fine-grained analysis of sub-policies may reveal additional topics where the Presidency exercises its agenda-setting powers. Finally, the evolution of the Presidency *work programmes* (studied in this article) into Council *provisional agendas* (published on the official website of the Council) and, eventually, legislative outputs should be further investigated. This would contribute to a more consistent and grounded evaluation of the rotating Presidency semesters.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this article indicates that, even in the post-Lisbon era, the rotating Council Presidency retains a degree of influence in agenda management. Its agenda management powers allow member states to prioritise different issues. Therefore, the institution still fosters a degree of equality among member states, allowing most of them (even those who would not usually be able to shape the EU agenda) to emphasise certain issues during their Presidency semesters.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. This can be observed through vertical venue-shopping activities, i.e. when a country transpose domestic issues to the EU agenda and frame them as supranational ones (Princen, 2009).
2. In the literature, agenda-setting is often used as a general term, referring to different agenda management activities. However, Tallberg (2003) narrowed the meaning of the concept to policy entrepreneurship, or issue inclusion on the agenda. For the purpose of this article, when utilising Tallberg's terminology, additional explanation of agenda-setting is added.
3. The content of the rotating Presidency programmes is neither cross-checked against the provisional Council agendas nor the Council proceedings. However, Presidency programmes often include calendars for the meetings/events, which are considered as an indicative agenda for the Council: such precision and planning allows the Presidency to claim credit for tasks accomplished by the end of the semester.
4. The Eurobarometer data on the 'most important issue in the country' are the most appropriate source of data for the purpose of this study. Nevertheless, this information dates back only to 2004, instead of 1997. Furthermore, several policy areas (e.g. agriculture, internal market) were never surveyed. Therefore, a significant number of data points are missing.
5. The dataset starts with the Luxembourg Presidency during the second semester of 1997 and ends with the Maltese Presidency in the first semester of 2017.

6. To check the reliability of the coding, a random sample of 400 quasi-sentences from 40 programmes was generated so to be checked by a second independent coder. Contrary to the comprehensive coding of the programmes, the sample did not include the context of specific quasi-sentences (unless it was necessary to assign the code). Therefore, it implies a more difficult task for the second coder to assign a specific topic number. Nevertheless, the inter-rater agreement score presented by Cohen's Kappa is 0.8, which presents a strong measure (Thomson, 2001).

7. (1) Priorities, (2) actions, (3) intentions for an action, (4) requirements for an action/ means, (5) general emphasis of certain issues, (6) concerns and (7) events.

8. For further information on the matching of issue areas/codes see the Online appendix.

9. Note that the other variables of the model vary across time, but are panel-invariant: since the panel dimension is given by policy areas, and the time dimension by subsequent country Presidencies, all country-specific (but not policy area-specific) variables do not vary, by construction, across panels, but only across time.

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