Dimensions of Political Contestation: Voting in the Council of the European Union before the 2004 Enlargement

Madeleine O. Hosli[*], **Marc C. J. Uriot**[**]

Abstract Studies of voting patterns in the Council of the European Union (EU) have increased since voting records in this institution have become more readily available. This paper builds on earlier work and explores coalition-formation and voting in the Council of the EU for the EU-15 (i.e., between 1995 and 2004), by analyzing cleavage patterns based on voting records for this institution. Focusing on the pre-enlargement phase, the paper provides new insights into earlier member state voting behavior in the Council on the basis of a range of independent variables, including governments' absolute and relative positions on the left-right policy dimension, pro-integration sentiments among domestic publics, governments' positions as either net beneficiaries or net payers into the EU budget and finally, number of votes in the Council. In methodological terms, we treat vote decisions as panel data and report adjusted standard errors for country-based clusters, using ordered probit regression to explain the propensity of EU member states to vote 'yes', abstain from voting, or vote 'no' in the Council. The ordered probit analysis used to explore the potential relevance of these dimensions provides insights that at times confirm, but also partially contradict, earlier findings on this topic. We notably find strong evidence for a North-South cleavage pre-enlargement, a significant role for the Presidency and moderate evidence for the relevance of public opinion and government left-right positioning in Council voting behavior.

Keywords European integration, Council of the European Union, contested votes, coalition-formation, policy dimensions

JEL classification C7, H1

1. Introduction

For decades, decision-making in the Council of the European Union (EU) largely occurred behind closed doors. But the transparency of decision-making and the flow of information regarding Council decisions have considerably increased since about the mid-1990s.

As the records show, a striking feature of decision-making in the Council of the EU is that the informal norm of consensus applies, even in cases where (qualified) majority

---

[*] Leiden University, Institute of Political Science, P.O. Box 9555, NL-2300 RB Leiden, the Netherlands. Email: hosli@fsw.leidenuniv.nl, Phone: +31-71-5273456.

[**] Leiden University, Institute of Political Science, P.O. Box 9555, NL-2300 RB Leiden, the Netherlands. Email: muriot@fsw.leidenuniv.nl, Phone: +31-71-5276779.

votes can formally be used (e.g. see Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace 1997; Mattila 2004; Moberg 1998, 2002; Hayes-Renshaw 2001; Sherrington 2000; Hix 1999a; Mattila and Lane 2001; Heisenberg 2005). In general terms it seems that governments of EU member states only abstain or cast negative votes in the Council if they wish to 'make a point' in domestic politics, i.e. signal their disagreement with a decision, mainly in consideration of the possible implications and reactions in domestic politics. In addition to this, proposals are usually only put up to a formal vote in the Council when it is fairly clear they will be accepted. In essence, any deviation from the consensus principle can be seen as a form of (official) protest.[1]

The fact that deliberations and negotiations usually proceed until consensus is reached in the Council means that the number of formal votes taken is fairly small. Nonetheless, given the modest number of abstentions and 'no' votes, there may be more opposition in the Council in reality, e.g. in the framework of proposals that fail to be accepted in the Council, rendering the number of actual contested decisions a 'downward biased' estimate of the true extent of dissent within this institution (Mattila 2004).

In the last few years, several studies have aimed to explain patterns of decision-making in the Council of the EU. Benefiting from the increased availability of Council voting data, researchers have started to systematically collect voting records and to search for patterns in Council voting behavior. For example, Hayes-Renshaw, Wallace and van Aken (2006) provide an in-depth overview of Council voting behavior,[2] using cluster analysis to show possible patterns of coalition-formation in the Council.

A pioneering study into explanatory factors for Council voting behavior is Mattila (2004). The current paper will use a similar research design as this prior study did, but use the Hayes-Renshaw et al. data, in combination with newly assembled data for a range of independent variables. The analysis focuses on the EU-15 (i.e., the years 1995 through 2004), aiming to extend earlier analyses of this time span. Our paper analyses extended data on the basis of several explanatory variables, including the left-right policy dimension, a potential North-South division and cleavages based on the level of domestic support for European integration. We also aim to account for the fact that voting outcomes in the Council are essentially limited to three (ordered) choices and accordingly, give estimations as regards the probability of abstentions and no-votes in the Council. Our analysis aims to help reveal the possible underlying factors that have determined voting patterns in the Council before the 2004 enlargement and with this, serve as a basis for explorations focusing on voting in the Council after 2004 (for such studies, see for example Plechanovová 2011 or Hosli et al. 2011).

To address these issues, our paper is structured as follows. Section 2 discusses selected work focusing on cleavages in EU politics. The following section gives a detailed description of both the dependent variable in our analysis and the several

---

[1] However, as Hagemann (2005) emphasizes, governments also have the option to voice their dissent during the voting procedure by having formal statements and explanations recorded. Several EU member states, notably small and medium-sized countries, often make their opposition explicit by using this tool. In addition, small states appear to be more inclined to oppose decisions at earlier stages of the legislative process, and often do so through formal statements rather than voting.

[2] Council voting data have also been explored, for example, by Mattila and Lane (2001) and Hosli (1999).

independent variables, explaining the ways they are measured ('operationalized') in practice. Subsequently, in Section 4, ordered probit regression is employed in order to explain vote choice in the Council, providing estimates based on country-specific clusters and adjusted standard errors. The final section of our paper summarizes and discusses the main results of the analysis.

2. Domestic policy dimensions and European Union politics

Analyzing party manifestos by European parliamentary groups, Simon Hix (1999b) found that two major policy dimensions structure actor behavior in EU policy making: an integration-independence dimension and a left-right policy dimension. With this study, the author partially corroborated earlier findings as presented in Hix and Lord (1997). Similarly, Gabel and Hix (2002), studying party manifestos of European Parliament (EP) political groups, found empirical evidence for a two-dimensional model. By comparison, Hix et al. (2006), in an analysis of roll call votes cast within the EP, find evidence for an almost exclusive left-right division within the EP.

In a similar vain, studying the potential relevance of a left-right cleavage in EU politics, partially using information on government preferences regarding the Treaty of Amsterdam as contained in a report issued by the EP, Aspinwall (2002) confirms the importance of a left-right cleavage in EU politics and find that support for integration and left-right positioning is related in the form of an 'inverted u-curve'.

Recently, in studies of Council voting behavior, authors have used government locations on the left-right policy dimension to explain voting behavior. In a fairly early study, Mattila (2004) uses the location of actors on a one-dimensional left-right scale based on data provided by Hix and Lord (1997, p. 27–49). Focusing his research on voting behavior in the Council between 1995 and 2000, Mattila finds that the left-right policy dimension has only moderate explanatory power regarding the decision of EU member states to either abstain or cast a negative vote in the Council. By comparison, the left-right policy division generates strongly significant results in the analysis presented by Hagemann (2005), who aims to replicate Mattila's analysis on the basis of a broadened data set, differentiating between stages prior to the final decision and votes cast at the last stage of the EU legislative process. Hagemann also uses information on the location of governments on the left-right policy dimension, but uses data on placements of domestic political parties on a left-right dimension as given in Benoit and Laver (2005). Both studies reveal a positive relationship between negative votes or abstentions in the Council and government left-right policy locations, suggesting that—irrespective of the ideological contents of the proposals voted upon—right-of-center governments in the EU are more inclined to oppose the majority in the Council than those that are situated left-of-center.

This pattern is found to be reversed, however, for the EU-15 states in an analysis of Council voting behavior after the 2004 enlargement (Hosli et al. 2011). The authors attribute this finding to the fact that the 'center of gravity' in the Council has shifted to the right and hence, in the more recent past, formal opposition against policy proposals is most frequent among governments located left-of-center. By comparison, for the ten

new EU member states as of 2004, no significant left-right cleavage is discerned.

Our present paper will also use government left-right location as one of the explanatory variables for voting behavior in the Council of the EU, but here for the phase before the 2004 enlargement. However, as an alternative specification, similar to Hosli et al. (2011), our analysis will also provide information on the relative positioning of governments compared to others on the left-right policy scale, by providing information on a government's absolute distance to the average left-right position of governments in the EU. In contrast to the conventional use of the position on the left-right dimension as a predictor, this additional variable will hence indicate whether ideological policy considerations in the sense of distance from the majority have influenced Council voting behavior.

Mattila (2004), in his analysis, also employs EU governments' extent of 'Euroskepticism' or support for European integration, as a predictor.[3] Hagemann (2005) approximates governments' positions on the 'more-less integration' scale by using data on attitudes of domestic political parties towards European integration, based on expert surveys as provided in Marks and Steenbergen (2004a). As Eurobarometer (EB) data are available on a yearly basis for the time span analyzed here—the EU-15—the present study will use Eurobarometer data on public support for EU integration, following Mattila's analysis (2004), but extend the information to assessments on a yearly basis for 1995 to 2004. In addition to this, our paper provides information on government support for European integration, using data from the Chapel Hill Party Survey. In accordance with earlier research, we will hypothesize that governments of EU states with a 'pro-European' public will tend to agree with the majority and will hence be less inclined to either cast a negative vote or abstain in the framework of Council voting procedures. Similarly, we assume that governments composed of political parties favoring European integration will be less inclined to opposed the majority in the Council.

Research aiming to test the potential existence of a 'North-South cleavage' in EU politics usually distinguishes between EU states as either 'net beneficiaries' or 'net payers' with regards to the EU budget. In a bivariate assessment of voting behavior, Mattila (2004) finds the influence of governments' EU budget status on voting outcomes to be significant, but the significance no longer materializes in his multivariate exploration of Council voting records. Similarly, the North-South division has no significant effect in the analysis presented by Hagemann (2005). Nonetheless, net budget status will be used as an additional explanatory variable for voting behavior in the Council in this paper, assuming, in accordance with earlier research, that 'net beneficiaries' are more inclined to vote with the majority in Council voting procedures.[4]

As far as a potential North-South division is concerned, Elgstrøm et al. (2001) find little evidence for cleavages in EU decision making apart from this dimension, a finding that is largely corroborated by Zimmer et al. (2005).

---

[3] His analysis uses data from Eurobarometer 49 (Spring 1998). Using these data, he assesses the percentage of respondents who think the EU is a 'good thing' minus the percentage of respondents who think it is a 'bad thing' within each member state.

[4] Moreover, in order to double check results obtained, this measure of a potential North-South cleavage will be complemented by figures on EU states' levels of GDP per capita, hypothesizing again that richer states will be more inclined to oppose the majority in formal Council voting procedures.

Several studies have illustrated potential divisions between small and large states in EU decision-making (e.g., Moberg 1998, 2002). Hagemann (2005) also accounts for this potential division, using EU states' voting power as a measure of 'size', while Mattila (2004), uses Council voting weight instead.[5] In both studies, this variable is found to have a fairly significant effect on vote choice in the Council, with large states formally voting against the majority or abstaining more frequently than small or medium-sized EU states. The propensity to vote against a proposal in the Council or to abstain, according to a study by Heisenberg (2005), is correlated with size rather than with wealth, net contributor status or the number of years a state has been a member of the EU. Hence, it is interesting to explore whether the size of EU member states, as measured by the state's voting weight in the Council, affects respective voting behavior.[6] The subsequent analysis will follow these earlier explorations, hypothesizing that larger member states can afford to oppose the majority in the Council—by casting a negative vote or abstaining—and hence are more inclined towards opposition of the majority in formal Council voting.

Several authors have explored the role and significance of the Council presidency in EU decision-making (e.g., Tallberg 2004; Schout and Vanhoonacker 2006). Research often focuses on the question of whether the president tends to act as an 'honest broker' or supports his or her government's interests in Council decision-making. For example, Selck and Steunenberg (2004), exploring the potential role of the presidency in formal models of EU legislative decision making, find that holding the presidency may indeed privilege the preferences of the respective member state in EU decisions. In addition to this, countries that hold the presidency are often ambitious to further advance EU integration and are thus less likely to oppose proposals put up to a formal vote in the Council. Mattila (2004) also includes this variable in his analysis of Council voting records, finding that governments which hold the presidency cast significantly fewer negative votes and have a lower propensity to abstain than other governments in the EU. Hagemann (2005) finds similar patterns in her empirical analysis. Based on these prior explorations, it will subsequently be hypothesized that an EU state holding the presidency will be less inclined to vote against the majority in Council decision making than other EU governments.

3. Analyzing voting behavior in the Council: variables, operationalization, and data

The subsequent analysis will predominantly draw on independent variables used in earlier studies, but as a new element, will assesses these data on a yearly basis for

---

[5] Hagemann (2005) uses member states' voting power based on power indices in the Council as an explanatory variable. Whereas this is an interesting extension of respective analyses, as values for formal voting power and voting weights may diverge, this distinction will not be accounted for in this study. This is due to the fact that these two indicators are strongly correlated for the 1995 to 2004 time span.

[6] Although the attribution of votes to EU states in the Council is largely based on population size, the match is not straightforward; e.g. see Hosli and Wolffenbuttel (2001) or Taagepera and Hosli (2006). In the 1995 to 2004 data set used for the current study, however, population size and number of votes in the Council are highly correlated ($r = 0.95$).

the time span 1995 through 2004. The dependent variable in the following analysis is voting behavior of EU member states in the Council, distinguishing between positive votes, abstentions, and negative votes. Our study will include all (approved) Council legislative acts[7] based on data provided in Table 3 of Hayes-Renshaw et al. (2006).[8] Figures regarding the total number of legislative acts are based on Heisenberg (2005) and Hayes-Renshaw et al. (2006). Accordingly, the total number of observations in our analysis is 31,545: one entry for the dependent variable for each vote choice by each EU-15 member state for each legislative act approved in the 1995 to 2004 time span (and respective data for a total of fifteen different independent variables, as described below). However, for the actual quantitative analysis, we will cluster the data for each of the fifteen member states, in order to control for potential dependence between the individual entries in our data set.

Regarding operationalization of the independent variables, our analysis proceeds as follows. In order to locate governments on a left-right policy scale and to account for the fact that coalition governments are composed of representatives of different domestic political parties, we use the following procedure: for each year and each EU member state for the 1995 to 2004 time span, we assess government location in terms of the number of ministerial positions held by representatives of respective domestic political parties (on this choice for operationalization also see, for example, Van Roozendaal, Hosli and Heetman 2011). In general terms, the attempt to locate domestic political parties in a consistent manner on the left-right policy scale, for the entire phase focused on in this study, is far from a simple endeavor. Clearly, information needs to be derived on the basis of similar tools, and in addition to this, political parties need to be placed on comparable scales.

Among studies on left-right party locations, two sources in particular provided a good basis for data points in our analysis. The first source is expert interview data as provided by Laver and Hunt (1992) (and later Benoit and Laver 2005). An alternative to this is data points regarding parties' left-right positions as collected by Leonard Ray in 1984, 1988, 1992 and 1996, followed by those collected by Marks and Steenbergen (2004a, 2004b).[9] In order to estimate each government's location on the left-right policy scale for each year, the subsequent analysis will weigh the number of ministerial positions held by domestic political parties within governments across the EU-15.[10] Governments' left-right positioning according to both of these sources will be used in our analysis, but as the two alternative assessments correlate quite strongly, only one

---

[7] Unfortunately, information on failed legislative acts—i.e. those not approved by the Council—is hard to come by.

[8] The study by Hayes-Renshaw et al. also provides data for the year 1994, informally released to the authors by the Council Secretariat. However, our own analysis will be limited to the 1995 through 2004 time span, notably in order to allow for consistency in terms of the size of EU membership.

[9] In this alternative source, information was gained on the basis of expert interviews.

[10] Government changes that occurred within a given year are accounted for by weighing the number of months a government has been in office with the respective policy positions of their constituent domestic political parties. The 15th day of the month was chosen as the cut-off point. In practice, if a new government took effect on the 17th day of a month, the score used for that month was the score for the composition of the previous government in power. If a new government took office before the 15th, however, the score for the month was determined by the new government composition.

alternative will be included in the overall assessment in practice.[11]

Building on the study by Mattila (2004) as well as theoretical insights into potential dimensions of EU political contestation, the subsequent analysis will explore whether levels of domestic support for European integration—mirroring, to a certain extent, an integration-independence dimension—have indeed influenced the propensity of governments to either cast negative votes or abstain from Council decision making. As in Mattila's study, data on public support will be based on Eurobarometer data. However, in order to expand this analysis, our study assesses rates of domestic support for European integration for each year between 1995 and 2004.[12] In practice, this leads to the inclusion of information from Eurobarometer 43 through 62 into the analysis.[13] In our study, the role of the presidency is accounted for by including information on which governments held the presidency during each year under study. Code 1 (presidency=1) is used if an EU member state held the half-yearly presidency within the respective year under study, but code 0 if it did not (presidency=0).[14] The position of EU member states as 'net beneficiaries' or 'net payers' with regards to the EU budget is not entirely straightforward, as overall financial gains and losses are not easy to measure in practice. This variable will nonetheless be included in our analysis, using data from a publication by the European Commission (2005) for the EU-15. Aiming to express 'net budget status' in relative terms, however, we will use figures on net budget status as a percentage of Gross National Income (GNI). In addition to this, our paper will investigate in which ways net budget status and support for EU integration were related to each other.[15] An overview of the summary statistics for these variables—the number of observations, mean value, standard deviation, the minimum and the maximum—is given in the appendix to this article (see Table A1).

4. Ordered probit analysis of Council voting outcomes using country clusters

As far as the dependent variable in our study is concerned, we distinguish between three possible vote choices for each government in any of the Council constellations

---

[11] As there are some missing entries for left-right positioning of political parties in the Laver, Hunt and Benoit data from 1995 to 2004 (such as, for example, for France in 1995) these entries were first coded as missing in the overall spreadsheet, reducing the number of data points to 27,339. However, in order to generate data for these missing cases, we have used the Ray, Marks and Steenbergen data source to replace the respective values and vice versa. More information on this is given in the section of our paper that describes the empirical analysis.

[12] Both Mattila (2004) and Hagemann (2005) are also interested in the potential interaction effects between the left-right and integration-independence dimensions, with the latter being reflected in the 'support for European integration' scores. In accordance with these earlier assessments, our analysis will also test an interaction term for these variables.

[13] As in Mattila's study, support for integration is assessed using the percentage of respondents indicating that the EU is a 'good thing' minus those claiming it is a 'bad thing' within each EU member state.

[14] Mattila (2004) even provides the exact effect of the half-yearly presidency on voting outcomes (our study assesses the role of this variable within a one-year frame, as we assume effects of this variable may last a bit longer).

[15] A bivariate regression of support for EU integration (in public opinion) on net budget status shows a significant effect ($b = 5.67$, $P > |T| = 0.000$; $R^2 = 0.11$), but the strength of the correlation between these variables is only moderate ($r = 0.336$).

for the 1995 to 2004 time span: affirmative votes are coded as 1, abstentions as 2 and negative votes as 3. Some authors, however, essentially combine the choice for abstention with the choice 'negative vote' to create one analytic category (e.g., see Mattila 2004, Hagemann 2005). In practice, member state representatives in the Council will indeed often abstain from voting if they wish to express opposition to a decision made by this institution. In terms of formal procedures, in the framework of qualified majority voting, an abstention may indeed count as much as a negative vote. However, the subsequent analysis will distinguish between three possible outcome categories, as member states' choice of a negative vote appears to nonetheless indicate stronger opposition to a decision made by the Council than abstention, or may even take the form of an official 'protest' as a signal to domestic audiences. As vote choices, in this approach, are essentially ordered—ranging from a positive vote, to abstention, to a negative vote—our analysis will employ ordered probit regression analysis to assess the potential effects of a range of independent variables on government vote choice in the Council. The basis for this empirical exploration is the entire set of voting records in the Council on which information is available (i.e., all legislative acts accepted in the 1995 to 2004 time span). Since our data records effectively have the characteristics of panel data—as they consist of fifteen member state governments voting on a total of 2103 occasions for which we have information—we will adjust the standard errors in our analysis for country-based clusters.

First, a correlation matrix between the independent variables used in our study shows that the assessments of left-right government positions estimated on the basis of the Laver, Hunt and Benoit, and the Ray, Marks and Steenbergen data collections, respectively, are highly correlated ($r = 0.9307$). However, scores for government left-right positioning obtained by the Laver-Hunt-Benoit data, compared to the assessments based on data provided by Ray, Marks and Steenbergen, are located somewhat more to the right on this policy scale (as the minimum is 8.1 on the 1 to 20 scale as compared to 0.32 on the 0 to 1 scale).[16] The correlation matrix also reveals that member state population size corresponds rather closely with the number of votes governments have in the Council ($r = 0.95$). Hence, to avoid potential problems of multicollinearity, our analysis will operate on the basis of only one of these specifications for the size of EU member states: the number of votes in the Council. Even though the two left-right measures are highly correlated with each other, we will use both of these alternatives in sequence to find out whether any of the variable specifications has a significant effect on Council voting behavior. In addition, individually, neither of the datasets used to assess left-right positioning provides a complete assessment for the EU-15.[17] In fact, in a second stage, in order to have measures for all fifteen EU member states before the 2004 enlargement (the EU-15), we will use the alternative set to fill up missing values in our analysis.

In line with earlier studies, our empirical analysis shows that in general, between 1995 and 2004, governments were much more likely to agree with the Council majority

---

[16] See Appendix, Table 1A.

[17] The data based on information provided by Laver, Hunt and Benoit does not contain any detailed estimates for France and Italy, whereas data based on the work by Ray, Marks and Steenbergen lacks information for Luxembourg.

than to oppose it, illustrating the force of 'consensus decision making' in the Council. In fact, an assessment of overall probabilities for the three possible outcome categories ('yes', 'abstain', and 'no'), assessed for the 1995 to 2004 time span, shows that the propensity of voting 'yes' was by far the largest ($p = 0.9796$), essentially approaching a probability of one. By comparison, the overall probability of abstaining was only 0.0066 and finally, the probability of voting 'no' 0.0138. Clearly, this implies that decision making by consensus strongly determined patterns of behavior in the Council within the EU-15. However, regarding the remaining probabilities, in which way did the potential explanatory variables described above affect vote choice in the Council?

Table 1. Ordered probit analysis of vote choice in the Council of the European Union 1995–2004 (standard errors clustered by member state)

Basis for left-right estimates:	Laver, Hunt, Benoit		Ray, Marks, Steenbergen	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Government left-right position	0.0121*	0.0124	0.0659	−0.0266
		(0.0143)	(0.3076)	(0.3061)
Position on left-right dimension		0.0495*		0.7751
relative to mean		(0.0264)		(0.5642)
Support for European integration	−0.0036*	−0.0035**	−0.0020	−0.0015
(public opinion)	(0.0019)	(0.0017)	(0.0017)	(0.0016)
Net budget status	−0.0025***	−0.0027***	−0.0025***	−0.0026***
	(0.0001)	(0)	(0.0001)	(0.0001)
Voting weight	0.0191	0.0095	0.0187	0.0156
	(0.0158)	(0.0129)	(0.0142)	(0.0138)
Presidency	−0.0851***	−0.0707**	−0.1016***	−0.1019***
	(0.0308)	(0.0313)	(0.0353)	(0.0379)
Cut-off score 1	2.2586	2.2307	2.0935	2.1216
	(0.2056)	(0.1578)	(0.2245)	(0.1635)
Cut-off score 2	2.4197	2.3921	2.2602	2.2886
	(0.2211)	(0.1714)	(0.2385)	(0.1761)
Log likelihood	−2995.3	−2989.1	−3422.0	−3417.1
LR $\chi^2(5)$	156.84		91.69	
LR $\chi^2(6)$		508.53		140.25
Prob > χ^2	0	0	0	0
Pseudo R^2	0.0176	0.0197	0.012	0.0134
n	27339	27339	29211	29211

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses, *,**,*** denote statistical significance at 0.1, 0.05 and 0.01, respectively.

The empirical findings of our study are presented in Table 1, for two alternative model specifications: model 1 incorporates the variables mentioned frequently in the literature (here without interaction terms).[18] An alternative model (model 2) uses,

---

[18] In our analysis, neither the interaction between left-right position and support for EU integration nor the interaction between support for EU integration and net budget status generated significant effects. We hence drop the interaction terms in the tables representing our results.

alongside basic government left-right positioning, the relative position of a government on the left-right scale as an additional explanatory variable.

When using the left-right scores derived on the basis of the Laver-Hunt-Benoit expert scores, most of the independent variables integrated into model 1 have a significant effect on vote choice in the Council. An exception—largely contradicting earlier research—is the size of member states, here measured in terms of the number of votes a government has in the Council. In our multivariate assessment, i.e. holding all other variables constant, this independent variable does not seem to have a significant effect on vote choice in the Council. In accordance with effects hypothesized earlier, however, governments located more to the right on the left-right policy scale, according to model 1, appear to be more inclined to oppose the Council majority. However, when relative left-right positioning is integrated into our analysis (see model 2), the effect of absolute left-right positioning disappears. In other words, when using scores based on the Laver-Hunt-Benoit assessments, it is relative left-right positioning, not the absolute position of a government on the left-right policy dimension, that matters, although effects are small. This result, derived on the basis of fresh calculations, still contradicts findings presented in earlier research on Council voting behavior for the 1995 to 2004 time span which found absolute government left-right positions to be relevant.

Similarly, governments buttressed by strong domestic public support for EU integration oppose the majority in the Council less frequently than do governments facing a more Euroskeptic public. This effect can be seen for the models based on the Laver-Hunt-Benoit data source for government left-right rankings. Similarly, and consistently, net budget status has a strong, significant (negative) effect on the probability that an EU state will oppose the Council majority. Accordingly, in line with earlier research, we find that in the framework of the EU-15, the more a member state was a 'net receiver' of the EU budget, the less likely it was to vote 'no' in formal Council voting procedures, according to the different model specifications used.

Finally, as our calculations demonstrate, if an EU state holds the presidency in a given year, it indeed is less likely to oppose the Council majority. In our assessment, based on the methodological approach as described above, this effect is strong and significant across the four alternative model specifications.

In all models used, the variable 'net budget position' shows significant effects. The direction of the beta-coefficients is negative, implying—largely in accordance with earlier research, but testifying even more strongly to the potential relevance of this variable—that net beneficiaries, in the 1995 to 2004 time span, were less likely to opposed the majority in the Council.

Although the assessment of left-right positioning based on the Laver, Hunt and Benoit expert scores is highly correlated to the positioning indicated by Ray, Marks and Steenbergen, estimates based on the latter data partially provide a different assessment of the explanatory factors for specific vote choice in the Council. According to the models based on these latter assessments, only net budget status and presidency have a significant influence on voting behavior in the Council of the EU. In both models 1 and 2, all other variables do not have significant effects. This also implies that for estimates based on this latter data set, it does not matter in practice whether absolute or relative

left-right positioning is used.[19]

Given that authors have indicated there may be a combined effect of left-right positioning and support for EU integration on government vote choice in the Council, our analysis included an interaction term in the models with the intention of testing for this possibility. Similarly, an interaction term for the variables 'Net budget status' and 'support for European integration' was tested. Neither of these interaction terms, however, resulted in a significant effect on vote choice and was therefore dropped from the respective models (also see above).

In contrast to multivariate models in which the dependent variable is continuous, the coefficients displayed in Table 1 cannot provide easily interpretable information about the effects of a unit-change in an independent variable on vote choice in the Council. In order to assess the effect of an independent variable on the probability of the respective government choosing one of the three vote options, it is necessary to assess effects in terms of changes in probabilities. Subsequently, based on the results presented above, we provide insights generated with the program Clarify (see King et al. 2000 and Tomz et al. 2001). Table 2 gives an overview—here based on model 2—of the different probabilities of EU states opposing the majority in the Council, depending on their relative location on specific independent variables.

The information given in Table 2 shows how the probability of an EU member state contesting a decision is affected by different independent variables. Table 2 also shows differences of probabilities according to specific locations of governments in terms of the independent variables. In order to get a comprehensive understanding of how the independent variables may influence vote choice, we have calculated the probabilities of contesting a Council decision for EU states positioned at the following locations of an independent variable: the minimum, maximum, and the mean, and one standard deviation from the mean, while all other variables (except the presidency, a variable set at 0 for this assessment), are held at their means.

Although the effects in terms of changes in probabilities are small, as Table 2 illustrates, the more extreme the position of a government on the left-right policy scale as compared to the Council majority, the higher this government's propensity was to either abstain or vote 'no' in the Council. By comparison, stronger support for integration in domestic public opinion marginally increased the likelihood that a government voted with the majority and decrease the probability that it would either abstain or vote 'no'.[20] Similarly, the more an EU member state was a net receiver of the EU budget, the more likely its government was to vote with the majority, and the less inclined it was

---

[19] Attempting to get more insights into this discrepancy between the datasets, we have tried to estimate models based on data for the EU-15 in which missing values are filled in on the basis of information derived from the alternative left-right estimates (the missing values have been calculated here by accounting for averages and standard deviations of the alternative data set). The results of these assessments, based on 'completed' data for the EU-15, are similar to the estimates based on the Ray-Marks-Steenbergen data (with the one missing value for Luxembourg), but when Italy is taken out of the calculations, the Laver-Hunt-Benoit data also shows similar results to the ones discussed above. However, the calculations based on the Ray-Marks-Steenbergen left-right scores—even with Italy taken out of the estimates—still only finds the net budget position and the presidency to be significant predictors of vote choice in the Council.

[20] As discussed above, these effects are only found, however, when the assessments based on the Laver-Hunt-Benoit data collection are used.

to either abstain or vote 'no' in the Council. Finally, the effect of the dummy variable 'Presidency' indicates that countries that held the Presidency in a given year between

Table 2. Opposition in the Council 1995–2004: Effects of selected independent variables on the probability of vote outcomes (%)

Explanatory variables (model 2)	Position on the respective independent variable[†]				
	Min	Mean minus one standard deviation	Mean	Mean plus one standard deviation	Max
Laver, Hunt, Benoit data					
Position on left-right dimension	0.996	1.081	1.286	1.537	2.154
relative to mean	0.514	0.550	0.635	0.733	0.956
Support for European integration	2.097	1.566	1.286	1.043	0.905
(public opinion)	0.935	0.745	0.635	0.535	0.475
Net budget status	2.765	1.304	1.286	1.303	0.677
	1.182	0.642	0.635	0.642	0.370
Presidency[‡]	1.286				1.074
	0.635				0.545
Ray, Marks, Steenbergen data					
Net budget status	2.857	1.442	1.440	1.442	0.805
	1.253	0.724	0.723	0.724	0.445
Presidency	1.440				1.111
	0.723				0.579

[†] The first figure in a row—for columns two through six—gives the effect of a variable on the probability of a government voting 'no' in the Council; the second estimated effects for the probability of abstention.
[‡] For these calculations, all other variables were kept at their mean values, with the exception of the presidency variable (kept at 0, as holding the presidency constituted an exception to the regular patterns of representation).

1995 and 2004 were less likely to abstain or cast a negative vote in the Council and more likely to agree with the majority.

The information given in Table 2, however, provides us with some additional, more detailed information. First, it is clear that while significant, the effect of holding the presidency is small in absolute terms: according to estimates based on both left-right assessments, the probability of opposing the Council majority decreased modestly when a country held the EU presidency in a given year. Second, the net budget status only seems to have an effect for the largest net contributors and recipients. Based on assessments using both alternatives of left-right estimates, there appears to be much less of an effect for the majority of countries located in the middle of this scale,[21] while the largest net contributor is twice as likely to contest a vote as a member state located at the mean; however, the largest receiver is half as likely to contest the majority. Finally, both support for EU integration in public opinion and relative left-right positioning— here only as assessed on the basis of Laver-Hunt-Benoit expert scores—only seem to have effects when assessed at one end of this spectrum: The probabilities of contesting

---

[21] There is little to no effect for the 68% that is located between standard deviation less than the mean and standard deviation more than the mean.

the Council majority increase substantially for member states facing a rather Euroskeptic domestic public, but the difference between member states facing a public that is highly positive about the EU and states facing an average domestic support for EU integration is much smaller. Similarly, the difference between governments with an average score in terms of relative left-right positioning, as compared to those closer to the EU left-right average, is smaller than is the difference between governments with an average relative position on this scale and governments with a larger distance to the average left-right score of EU governments. These additional calculations demonstrate not only which variables significantly influence vote choice in the Council, but also their effects according to the specific location of a government on a respective policy dimension.

5. Conclusions

What factors determined voting behavior in the Council of the EU in the 1995 to 2004 time span, i.e. a first phase of the EU for which Council voting records became fully available? Our study assesses governments' overall probability to have supported a majority decision, abstained or voted 'no' in Council decision making for the EU-15. In addition, it explores possible systematic factors that may have determined governments' choice to either cast negative votes in the Council or abstain when formal votes were taken. Our paper partially builds on earlier analyses that explored this issue, and assesses the potential effect of several independent variables on Council voting records for this time span.

Our analysis as presented in this paper extends earlier work on Council voting, by using data on a yearly basis for the 1995 to 2004 time period, for several independent variables, including government left-right positioning according to two different assessment methods, net budget status and domestic support for European integration. In this sense, our study extends and refines earlier analyses.

Clearly, the probability of a government choosing the option 'yes' in Council voting procedures was high, confirming the importance of 'consensus culture' in Council practice within the EU-15. Regarding the remaining probabilities for vote choice, the results of our ordered probit regression for voting behavior in the Council pre-enlargement reveal that insights generated by earlier quantitative explorations of Council voting behavior are partially confirmed on the basis of the extended data set used in this study. Other results, however, are no longer supported. The analysis of this paper indeed finds—based on yearly and more exact estimates of data for independent variables—that governments facing more Euroskeptic publics, were more likely to abstain or vote 'no' in formal Council voting procedures.[22] By comparison, net recipients of the EU budget, as well as EU states that held the Presidency in a specific year, tended to oppose the majority—i.e. abstain or vote 'no'—less frequently, although the magnitude of this latter effect is small. In contrast to earlier studies, as regards government left-right positioning, our study shows that it is not so much abso-

---

[22] This result is only found, however, when using the Laver-Hunt-Benoit data for government left-right assessments.

lute left-right placement that mattered, but instead, governments' relative positioning as regards the propensity to oppose the majority in Council voting procedures: the further a government was situated from the average EU government left-right location, the higher its probability was to oppose the Council majority. This intuitively plausible relation was partially confirmed in the empirical study as presented here.[23]

Finally, our assessment does not confirm significant effects found earlier for interactions between some of the independent variables used. Neither is the size of a member state a significant predictor of vote choice in our empirical analysis for the EU-15 time span. Our calculations regarding effects of independent variables on the probability of specific vote choices in the Council also reveal that effects of independent variables used in earlier studies depend in practice on where a specific EU government was located on a given policy scale—whether at the minimum, maximum, mean or an intermediate score on the respective policy dimension. For example, the probability of contesting the Council majority was higher for EU states in which public opinion was very negative about EU integration, as compared to states with an average public support for the EU. By comparison, the difference in effects was much smaller between EU states facing a domestic public that was positive about EU integration and those facing an average level of support.

In addition to the quantitative effects found in the current study, it is likely that other factors, including 'political culture' or selected domestic institutional constraints, for example, may have influenced the propensity of governments, in the 1995 to 2004 time span, to either cast negative votes or abstain in formal Council voting procedures. It is likely that such effects also apply in the post-2004 time phase. However, although some of the assessed effects are small, the analysis conducted in our study reveals that a systematic (quantitative) exploration of possible factors influencing vote choice on contested decisions in the Council illustrates that cleavages relevant in other areas of EU political contestation—including the left-right policy division, the integration-independence dimension, and a 'North-South cleavage'—may also be relevant to voting behavior in the Council of the EU.

---

[23] The result was only found, however, when left-right scores based on data provided by Hunt, Laver and Benoit were used.

References

Aspinwall, M. (2002). Preferring Europe: Ideology and National Preferences on European Integration. *European Union Politics,* 3(1), 81–111.

Benoit, K. and Laver, M. (2005). *Party Politics in Modern Democracies.* London, Routledge.

Elgstrøm, O., Bjurulf, B., Johansson, J. and Sannerstedt, A. (2001). Coalitions in European Union Negotiations. *Scandinavian Political Studies,* 24(2), 111–128.

European Commission (EC) (2005). Allocation of Operating Expenditure by Member State. Brussels, EC, September.

Gabel, M. and Hix, S. (2002). Defining the EU Political Space: An Empirical Study of the European Elections Manifestos, 1979–1999. *Comparative Political Studies,* 35(8), 934–964.

Hagemann, S. (2005). Decision-Making in the EUs Council of Ministers: Changes in Voting Behaviour Across Different Stages of the Legislative Process. Mimeo.

Hayes-Renshaw, F. (2001). The Council and Enlargement: A Challenge or an Opportunity? *Journal of International Relations and Development,* 4(1), 9–12.

Hayes-Renshaw, F. and Wallace, H. (1997). *The Council of Ministers.* New York, St. Martins Press.

Hayes-Renshaw, F., Van Aken, W. and Wallace, H. (2006). When and Why the Council of Ministers of the EU Votes Explicitly. *Journal of Common Market Studies,* 44(1), 161–194.

Heisenberg, D. (2005). The 'Institution of Consensus' in the European Union: Formal versus Informal Decision-Making in the Council. *European Journal of Political Research,* 44, 65–90.

Hix, S. and Lord, C. (1997). *Political Parties in the European Union.* Basingstoke, Macmillan.

Hix, S. (1999a). *The Political System of the European Union.* New York, St. Martin's Press.

Hix, S. (1999b). Dimensions and Alignments in European Union Politics: Cognitive Constraints and Partisan Responses. *European Journal of Political Research,* 35, 69–106.

Hix, S., Noury, A. and Roland, G. (2006). *Democratic Politics in the European Parliament.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Hooghe, L., Marks, G. and Wilson, C.J. (2002). Does Left-Right Structure Party Positions on European Integration? *Comparative Political Studies,* 35(8), 965–989.

Hosli, M.O. (1999). Power, Connected Coalitions, and Efficiency: Challenges to the Council o the European Union. *International Political Science Review*, 20(4), 371–391.

Hosli, M. O. and Wolffenbuttel, R. F. (2001). Estimating the Vote Distribution in the Council of the European Union. *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 4(1), 38–54.

Hosli, M. O., Mattila, M. and Uriot, M. (2011). Voting in the Council of the European Union after the 2004 Enlargement: A Comparison of Old and New Member States. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 49(6), 1249–1270.

King, G., Tomz, M. and Wittenberg, J. (2000). Making the Most of Statistical Analyses: Improving Interpretation and Presentation. *American Journal of Political Science*, 44(2), 347–361.

Laver, M. and Hunt, W. B. (1992). *Policy and Party Competition*. London, Routledge.

Marks, G. and Steenbergen, M. (2004a). *European Integration and Political Conflict: Citizens, Parties, Groups*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Marks, G. and Steenbergen, M. (2004b). Marks/Steenbergen Party Dataset. Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, available at http://www.unc.edu/∼gwmarks/data.htm.

Mattila, M. and Lane, J.-E. (2001). Why Unanimity in the Council? A Roll Call Analysis of Council Voting. *European Union Politics*, 2(1), 31–52.

Mattila, M. (2004). Contested Decisions: Empirical Analysis of Voting in the European Union Council of Ministers. *European Journal of Political Research*, 43(1), 29–50.

Moberg, A. (1998). The Voting System in the Council of the European Union: The Balance Between Large and Small Countries. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 21(4), 437–465.

Moberg, A. (2002). The Nice Treaty and Voting Rules in the Council. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40(2), 259–282.

Plechanovová, B. (2011). The EU Council Enlarged: North-South-East or Core-Periphery? *European Union Politics*, 12(1), 87–106.

Schout, A. and Vanhoonacker, S. (2006). Evaluating Presidencies of the Council of the EU: Revisiting Nice. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 44(5), 1051–1077.

Selck, T. and Steunenberg, B. (2004). Between Power and Luck: The European Parliament in the EU Legislative Process. *European Union Politics*, 5(1), 25–48.

Sherrington, P. (2000). *The Council of Ministers: Political Authority in the European Union*. London and New York, Pinter.

Taagepera, R. and Hosli, M. O. (2006). National Representation in International Organizations: The Seat Allocation Formula Implicit in the European Union Council and Parliament. *Political Studies*, 54(2), 370–398.

Tallberg, J. (2004). The Power of the Presidency: Brokerage, Efficiency, and Distribution in EU Negotiations. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 42(5), 999–1022.

Tomz, M., Wittenberg, J. and King, G. (2001). CLARIFY: Software for Interpreting and Presenting Statistical Results. Version 2.0 Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, June 1, available at http://gking.harvard.edu.

Van Roozendaal, P., Hosli, M. O. and Heetman, C. (2011). Coalition Formation on Major Policy Dimensions: The Council of the European Union 1998 to 2004. *Public Choice* (forthcoming).

Zimmer, C., Schneider, G. and Dobbins, M. (2005). The Contested Council: The Conflict Dimensions of an Intergovernmental Institution. *Political Studies,* 20, 403–422.

Appendix

Table A1. Descriptive statistics

	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Vote	31545	1.035093	0.24877	1	3
Population size	31545	25044.1	25705.1	405.7	82536.7
Government left-right position (RMS)	29213	0.515093	0.124972	0.32	0.78
Government left-right position (LHB)	27339	11.46271	2.650482	8.1	17.35
Budget position	31545	0.515932	1.355919	−0.72	4.62
Support for European integration	31545	39.77535	22.85574	−15.5	79
Voting weight	31545	5.8	2.856617	2	10
Presidency	31545	0.133333	0.33994	0	1
Distance from average left-right position (RMS)	29213	0.095744	0.069025	0.000359	0.282839
Distance from average left-right position (LHB)	27339	2.157325	1.406103	0.080697	6.191233