Coalition-Formation, Cleavages and Voting Behavior in the Council of the European Union

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Paper to be presented at the CONNEX Final Conference,
March 6-8, 2008, Mannheim
Acknowledgments

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the workshop 'Who Governs in the Council of Ministers?' at the European University Institute, Badia Fiesolana, 19 to 20 May 2006, the First World Meeting of the Public Choice Societies in Amsterdam, 29 March to 1 April 2007, the fourth General Conference of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) in Pisa, 6-8 September 2007, the 6th Workshop of the Europaeum Economics of European Integration Research Project, 5-6 October in Prague and the workshop 'Distribution of Power and Voting Procedures in the EU' in Warsaw, October 12-13, 2007. I would like to thank participants at these events for helpful comments and feedback, notably Fiona Hayes-Renshaw, Bjørn Hoyland, Simon Hug, Thomas König, Mikko Mattila, Daniel Naurin, Hannu Nurmi, Pierpaolo Rossini, František Turnovec, René Torenvlied, Helen Wallace and Michael Wohlgemuth. Excellent research assistance for this paper was provided by Marc Uriot, now a PhD student at the Department of Political Science at Leiden University.
Abstract

This paper explores patterns of voting in the Council of the European Union (EU) by analyzing the full set of voting records for this institution between 1995 and 2004. It uses ordered probit regression, partially as based on rare events analysis, to explain the propensity of EU member states to vote ‘yes’, abstain from voting, or vote ‘no’ in formal Council voting procedures. The paper explains voting behavior on the basis of a range of independent variables, including governments' positions on the left-right policy scale, pro-integration sentiments within domestic publics, governments’ position as either net beneficiary or net payer into the EU budget, and number of votes in the Council. The analysis reveals that, rather systematically, the further the distance of a government from the average EU government left-right location, the lower the support for EU integration in domestic public opinion and the larger an EU member state, the more likely it is to oppose the majority in Council voting procedures.
1. Introduction

Traditionally, decisions in the Council of Ministers (the ‘Council of the European Union’) have been made behind closed doors. Although both the transparency of decision making and the flow of information regarding Council decisions have considerably increased since the mid-1990s, there remains a lack of extensive analyses of voting behavior and actor preferences in the Council.

However, on the basis of data collection on EU member states' actual voting behavior in the Council -- distinguishing between either supporting a proposal, casting a negative vote or abstaining -- recent analyses (e.g. Mattila 2004; Heisenberg 2005) have explored reasons for EU states to choose specific voting options. In an analysis close to Mattila (2004), Hagemann (2005) explores potential factors that influence Council voting behavior. She extends the database used in Mattila's research by accounting for different stages of decision making in the EU legislative process (i.e. whether votes in the Council are cast at the final stage of the legislative process or before the last stage).

Building on earlier data collections and insights into Council decision making, including the extensive analysis of the role and modes of operation of the Council presented by Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace (1997), Hayes-Renshaw, Wallace and van Aken (2006) give an in-depth overview of Council voting patterns. This paper will use data provided in their study and incorporate them into a multivariate exploration of Council decision making, accounting for the fact that voting outcomes are essentially limited to three (ordered) choices. This analysis will help reveal the possible underlying factors that determine voting patterns in the Council.

A striking feature of Council decision-making is that the informal norm of consensus applies, despite the fact that (qualified) majority votes can formally be used (e.g. see Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace 1997, Mattila 1998, Moberg 1998 and 2002, Hayes-Renshaw 2001, Sherrington 2000, Hix 1999a, Mattila and Lane 2001, Heisenberg 2005). There are different explanations for this fact. Generally, it seems that governments of EU member states either cast negative votes in the Council or abstain from voting if they wish to ‘make a point’ in domestic politics (i.e. signal their disagreement with a decision, mainly in consideration of the possible reactions of their domestic audiences). However, as Hagemann (2005) highlights, 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 (Hagemann 2005).
fact that negotiations usually proceed until consensus is reached in the Council means that the number of formal votes taken is small.

Studies focusing on actor preferences and decision making in the Council have recently increased. One contribution to this area is the project ‘Decision-making in the European Union’ (DEU),\(^1\) which investigates the relative explanatory power of various formal approaches to EU decision making (e.g. see Thomson et al. 2006 and Stokman and Thomson 2004). On the basis of expert surveys, the project collected data on the preferences of governments as represented in the Council, the European Parliament, and European Commission as collective actors, as well as on the salience actors attributed to specific issues. The project collected this information for a total of sixty-six legislative proposals, containing one hundred sixty-two controversial issues, which were discussed in the Council between January 1999 and December 2000.

More recently, in a large-scale exploration of preferences of domestic governments and other crucial domestic actors, the project ‘Domestic Structures and European Integration’ (DOSEI),\(^2\) used expert interviews to collect information on actor preferences regarding the content of the European Constitution. Employing various approaches of two-level game analysis,\(^3\) this project focuses on the influence of domestic settings on government preferences and behavior, exploring patterns of (intergovernmental) bargaining and negotiation outcomes, as well as the consequences of subsequent domestic (non-)ratification.

Such data collections help improve information on the effects of preference distributions and institutional rules in EU decision making. However, information on decision making within the Council remains rather scarce.\(^4\) By comparison, analyses of decision making in the European Parliament (EP) are fairly widespread, as voting records of European Members of Parliament (MEPs) are largely available. For example, Kreppel and Tsebelis (1999) explicitly focus on voting and coalition-formation within the EP. Recent research on roll call votes in the EP (e.g. Hix, Noury and Roland 2006) reveals the underlying patterns of voting behavior and decision making in this institution. Whereas Hix (1999b) finds two major dimensions in EU decision-making -- an integration-independence and a left-right dimension

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\(^1\) The data of the DEU project have been deposited with the Steinmetz Archive and are now integrated into the Data Archiving and Networked Services (DANS), available at http://www.dans.knaw.nl. The DEU project was funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), the German National Science Foundation and the Yryö Jahnsson Foundation (Helsinki, Finland).

\(^2\) The DOSEI project involves several academics mainly from European universities. It was funded by the European Union's 5th Framework Program. The project is coordinated by Thomas König at the University of Speyer. Detailed information on this project is available on the project's homepage at http://dosei.dhv-speyer.de.

\(^3\) See Hug and Schulz (2005), König (2005), König, Finke and Daimer (2005), Hix and Crombez (2005), Dorussen et al. (2005), Benoit et al. (2005).

\(^4\) A recent improvement to the situation is the webpage on Council voting data established by Daniel Naurin, available at http://councildata.ergu.gu.se.
-- Hix, Noury and Roland (2006) claim that the left-right dimension almost exclusively explains the voting behavior of MEPs.

Recent research emphasizes the important role of informal norms in EU decision making. For example, Farrell and Héritier (2003) demonstrate how overly simplified models of EU decision making -- modeled as formal interactions between the Commission, European Parliament and Council -- may not capture some important informal dynamics of the process. For example, actors may be able to anticipate the steps to be taken by others in different stages of the EU decision making procedures and hence adapt their strategies. Farrell and Héritier's analysis skillfully blends insights from (non-cooperative) game theory with those gained on the basis of a thorough knowledge of the details of the EU decision making processes. It also improves upon the relative merits of purely descriptive accounts, by highlighting the potential value of game theory to the analysis of EU legislative procedures and decision making. At the same time, the analysis stresses the limitations of a purely formalistic use of game theory, by addressing the importance of informal norms in EU decision making processes. In line with these assumptions, Heisenberg (2005) illustrates that consensus decision making in the Council potentially weakens findings obtained by rational-institutionalist analyses of the EU decision making process. Finally, information on expert perceptions regarding the influence of institutions and actors in EU decision making reveals the importance of formal, but also informal, dynamics within the EU’s institutional setting (e.g. Thomson and Hosli 2006).

This paper aims to build on former work by examining information available on cleavages, voting patterns, and decision behavior within the Council. This quantitative study seeks to illustrate important elements of both formal and informal dynamics in Council decision making processes and in addition, aims to confirm or disconfirm earlier findings on the basis of an extended data set (notably as regards values for relevant independent variables). In addition, elaborating on earlier formal analyses of EU governments' propensity to either cast a negative vote or abstain in the Council, the paper utilizes Council voting records that have only recently become available (Hayes-Renshaw, Wallace and van Aken 2006). The analysis covers the years 1995 through 2004, as this corresponds to a stable pattern of EU membership constituted by the EU-15. The paper analyses these data on the basis of several explanatory variables. The results point to the importance of both formal and informal dynamics in Council decision making and demonstrate the relative influence of some underlying cleavages in EU politics, including a left-right dimension and a ‘North-South’ cleavage.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section provides an overview of theoretical insights into EU decision making that may also be relevant for the explanation of voting behavior in the Council. It continues with a detailed description of how this study analyzes
voting behavior in the Council, explaining the variables used and the ways they are measured ('operationalized') in practice. Subsequently, ordered probit regression is employed in order to explain vote choice in the Council. The final section summarizes some of the main findings of this study and concludes the paper.


An analysis of decision making in the Council can benefit from insights gained by general theoretical studies of decision making within the EU. For example, various recent analyses have explored policy dimensions that may be relevant to EU politics. These studies are also likely to be important for the exploration of division lines and cleavages in Council decision making, as representatives in the Council are government ministers of EU member states.5

On the basis of an analysis of party manifestos by European parliamentary groups, Hix (1999b) finds that two major policy dimensions structure actor behavior in EU policy making: an integration-independence dimension and a left-right policy dimension. His study partially corroborates earlier insights by Hix and Lord (1997). By comparison, Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson (2002) claim that political contestation in the EU is based on a libertarian-authoritarian dimension (‘GAL-TAN’) as well as a left-right policy dimension. The authors also find that in essence, an ‘inverted u-curve’ relates support for European integration to left-right positioning: political parties in the middle of the left-right policy spectrum are more inclined to support European integration than are those located at the extreme ends of this policy scale. Aspinwall (2002) analyzes government preferences regarding the Treaty of Amsterdam on the basis of information contained in an EP report, assuming the prevalence of one major policy dimension (an ‘ideology dimension’). His analysis confirms the importance of a left-right division in EU politics.

A recent cross-comparison of the validity of different tools to measure actor preferences (notably expert surveys and information derived from manifesto research) by Marks, Hooghe, Steenbergen and Bakker (2007) finds empirical evidence which supports the validity of the Hooghe et al. (2002) analysis. However, Gabel and Hix (2002), using factor analysis in their study of party manifestos, find empirical confirmation for their two-dimensional model. By comparison, Hix, Noury and Roland (2006), in their analysis of roll call votes cast within the EP, find evidence for an almost exclusive left-right division within the EP.

Hence, the discussion regarding both the potential existence of a left-right cleavage in EU politics, and the possible existence and role of other policy dimensions -- notably an integration-independence dimension -- is far from finished. However, research has gradually confirmed that policy contestation in the EU occurs not only on the basis of integration preferences, but increasingly along the left-right divide in EU politics. Recently, in analyses of Council decision making, authors have also used governments' locations on the left-right policy scale to explain government voting behavior. Mattila (2004), in his analysis, uses the location of actors on a one-dimensional left-right scale based on the data provided by Hix and Lord (1997: 27-49). Mattila (2004), focusing his research on voting behavior in the Council between 1995 and 2000, 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). Hagemann (2005) 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, and also using data on the location of governments along the left-right scale. Her measures are based on placements of political parties on a left-right policy scale as given in Benoit and Laver (2005). Both studies reveal a positive relationship between negative votes or abstentions in the Council and left-right policy locations, suggesting that 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. Both studies also find an interaction between this policy dimension and support for EU integration (Mattila illustrates this relation graphically; see Mattila 2004: 44).

This paper will also use the left-right policy dimension as an explanatory variable for Council decision making. Based on earlier studies, the hypothesized effect is that governments located to the right of the left-right policy scale will be more inclined to either cast negative votes or abstain in Council decision making than governments located to the left on the left-right policy scale. However, as an alternative specification, the analysis will also provide information on the relative positioning of governments compared to others on the left-right scale: when the Council predominantly consists of governments right-of-center, it is likely that governments left-of-center will hold different policy priorities as compared to the majority in the Council and be more inclined to either abstain or cast a negative vote. Similarly, when the majority is left-of-center, governments located more to the right on the left-right policy scale will be more likely to oppose the majority. Accordingly, this analysis posits that the larger the distance between a government’s position and the average location of other EU governments on the left-right policy scale, the larger its inclination will be to oppose the majority in Council voting procedures.
Mattila (2004) also employs EU governments’ extent of ‘Euroskepticism’ or support for European integration, as an explanatory variable. Hagemann (2005) approximates governments’ position on the ‘more-less integration’ scale by using data based on expert surveys as provided in Marks and Steenbergen (2004a). As Eurobarometer (EB) data are available on a yearly basis for the time period analyzed here, the present study will use Eurobarometer data on public support for EU integration, following Mattila’s analysis (2004), but on a yearly basis for the 1995 to 2004 time span. In accordance with earlier research, it is hypothesized that governments of EU states with a ‘pro-European’ public will tend to agree with the majority and will also be less inclined to either cast a negative vote or abstain in the framework of Council voting procedures.

In the study of sixty-six Commission proposals scrutinized in the DEU project, Thomson et al. (2004) find that there are no clear dimensions on which actors align in EU policy making. The only dimension for which some (relatively weak) empirical support can be found is a North-South cleavage. The study finds that apart from this division there are no clear and consistent patterns of coalition formation among governments in EU politics. In a similar vein, Elgstrøm et al. (2001) find little evidence for cleavages in EU decision making apart from a North-South division in processes of EU coalition formation. These findings are largely corroborated by Zimmer et al. (2005).

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 practice, this dimension also encompasses non-material aspects, including those related to culture. Additionally, ‘net beneficiaries’ generally benefit from domestic publics who are supportive of EU integration. Mattila (2004), in a bivariate assessment of voting behavior, finds the influence of governments’ EU budget status on voting outcomes to be significant. However, 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’ will be more inclined to vote with the majority in Council voting procedures. In addition, the paper will test for the combined effect of support for integration and net budget status, by adding an interaction term between these variables to the analysis. Moreover, in order to double check results obtained, this measure of a potential North-South cleavage will be complemented by

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6 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.
figures on EU states’ levels of GDP per capita, hypothesizing again that richer states will be more inclined to formally oppose the majority in formal Council voting procedures.

Rational-choice institutionalist approaches have made a range of important contributions to the analysis of decision making in international organizations and institutions, including within the Council of the EU. For example, Carrubba and Volden (2001) aim to explain the choice of a specific voting rule in the Council of the EU. Beisbart et al. (2005) illustrate determinants for the choice of alternative decision rules in the Council, using various utility estimates for actors involved in the EU decision making process.

By comparison, the role of informal dynamics, combined with more formal dynamics, has influenced the study of consensus decision making for institutions other than the Council of the EU. For example, Rebecca Moody, in an analysis of decision making in the Security Council of the United Nations (UN), finds that the quest for legitimacy influences actors’ incentives to reach consensus rather than to formally cast negative votes or abstain. Similarly, a study on decision making in the framework of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and in the World Trade Organization (WTO) by Steinberg (2002) illustrates the role of consensus decision making in these organizations. Therefore, efforts to reach consensus are widespread in international organizations and are not only observed in the case of the Council of the EU. Given this fact, analyses of formal and informal dynamics influencing actors' propensity to achieve consensus remain somewhat underdeveloped.

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. 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. Similarly, Heisenberg (2005) emphasizes that the propensity to vote against a proposal in the Council, or to abstain, 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. The subsequent analysis will follow these earlier explorations,

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7 For a critique of such approaches see Heisenberg (2005).
8 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.
9 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 ($r = 0.95$).
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 (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 decision making processes. 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. Mattila’s finding is corroborated by Hagemann (2005). 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 dependent variable in the subsequent analysis is voting behavior of EU states in the Council, distinguishing between positive votes, abstentions, and negative votes. The analysis will predominantly draw on independent variables used in earlier studies, covering the time span 1995 through 2004. It includes all (approved) Council legislative acts\(^\text{10}\) based on data provided in Table 3 of Hayes-Renshaw, Wallace and van Aken (2006).\(^\text{11}\) Figures regarding the total number of legislative acts are based on Heisenberg (2005) and Hayes-Renshaw, Wallace and van Aken (2006). The total number of observations in the 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 between 1995 and 2004 (and respective data for a total of fifteen different independent variables or their substitutes, as described below).

Regarding operationalization of the independent variables, the subsequent analysis will proceed 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, the following procedure was chosen: for each year and each EU

\(^{10}\) Clearly, it would be interesting to replicate such an analysis for the current constellation of EU membership. This extension, however, requires collection of comparable data for all independent variables involved in the quantitative analysis.

\(^{11}\) The study by Hayes-Renshaw et al. also provides data for the year 1994, informally released to the authors by the Council Secretariat. However, the present study will limit the analysis to the 1995 through 2004 time span in order to allow for consistency in terms of the size of EU membership.
member state from 1995 through 2004, government location was assessed in terms of the number of cabinet posts (ministerial positions) held by representatives of respective domestic political parties. However, the attempt to locate domestic political parties on a consistent left-right policy scale for the entire time period used in this study was not a simple endeavor: information needs to be derived on the basis of similar tools and political parties need to be placed on comparable scales. Among studies on left-right party locations, two sources in particular provided a good number of data points for this study. The first source is data provided on the basis of expert interviews by Laver and Hunt (1997), and later Benoit and Laver (2005). A second collection of data points regarding parties’ left-right positions is data collected by Leonard Ray in 1984, 1988, 1992 and 1996, followed by those collected by Marks and Steenbergen (2004a, 2004b). Again in this second source, information was extracted on the basis of expert interviews.

The subsequent analysis will weigh the number of cabinet posts held by domestic political parties within governments in order to estimate each government's location on the left-right policy scale for each year. The left-right positioning according to both of these sources will be used in the subsequent analysis, but as the two alternative assessments correlate quite strongly, only one alternative -- the one based on the Laver-Hunt and Benoit data -- will be included in the overall assessment in practice.

Building on the analysis 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 – indeed influence the propensity of governments to either cast negative votes or abstain from Council decision making. Data on public support will, as in Mattila's study, be based on Eurobarometer data. However, in order to expand this analysis, the current study assesses rates of domestic support for European integration for each year between 1995 and 2004. In practice, this leads to the inclusion of information from EB 43 through 62 into the analysis. Both Mattila (2004) and Hagemann (2005) are also interested in the potential interaction effects between the left-right and integration-

\[12\] Government changes occurring 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 would be the score of the previous government in power. If a new government took office before the 15th, however, the score for the month is determined by the new government.

\[13\] As there are some missing entries for left-right positioning of political parties in the data from 1995 to 2004 (such as, for example, for France in 1995) these entries are coded as missing in the overall spreadsheet. In the subsequent probit analysis, this reduces the total number of cases analyzed from 31,545 to 27,339.

\[14\] As in Mattila's study, support for integration will be assessed using the percentage of respondents indicating that the EU is a ‘good thing’ versus those claiming it is a ‘bad thing’ within each EU member state.
independence dimensions (the latter being reflected in the ‘support for European integration’ scores). In accordance with these earlier assessments, the subsequent analysis will also use an interaction term for these variables.

The role of the presidency will be accounted for in the set of independent variables by including information on which government held the presidency during each year under study. Code 1 (presidency=1) will be used if an EU member state held the half-yearly presidency within the respective year under study and code 0 if it did not (presidency=0). 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 the subsequent 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, the analysis will use figures on net budget status as a percentage of Gross National Income (GNI). In addition, the paper will investigate in which ways net budget status and support for EU integration are related to each other.15

4. Ordered Probit and Rare Events Analysis of Council Voting Outcomes

The subsequent analysis will distinguish between three possible vote choices for each government in any of the Council constellations from 1995 to 2004: affirmative vote (code 1), abstention (code 2) or negative vote (code 3). Some authors (e.g. Mattila 2004) have essentially combined the choice for abstention with the choice ‘negative vote’ to create one analytic category. In practice, member states will indeed often abstain from voting if they wish to express opposition to a decision made by the Council. However, the subsequent analysis will distinguish between three possible outcome categories, as member states’ choice of a negative vote appears to indicate stronger opposition to a decision made by the Council than abstention. As vote choices are essentially ordered -- ranging from approval (positive vote), to abstention, to a negative vote -- the subsequent analysis will employ ordered probit regression analysis to assess the potential effects of a range of independent variables on vote choice in the Council of the EU. The basis for this empirical exploration is the entire set of voting records in the Council on which information is available (all legislative acts accepted between 1995 and 2004). A subsequent refinement of the analysis, however, will only use a random selection of data from the full data set.

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 square = 0.11), but the strength of the correlation between these variables is only moderate (r = 0.336).
First, a correlation matrix between the independent variables used (see Appendix 1, table 1) 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 are highly correlated ($r = 0.9307$). However, scores for government left-right positioning obtained by the Laver-Hunt-Benoit data, compared to the assessments 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, respectively; see Appendix, table 2). The correlation matrix also reveals that member state population size corresponds rather closely with the number of votes in the Council ($r = 0.9533$). Hence, the subsequent analysis will, for each of these explanatory variables, operate on the basis of only one of these specifications (the Laver-Hunt-Benoit scores for government left-right positioning and the number of votes in the Council). However, the correlation matrix also reveals that the variables ‘Net Budget Status’ and ‘GDP per capita’ are no substitutes for each other (the correlation coefficient between these variables is -0.693, as net beneficiaries of the EU budget have higher scores on the ‘Budget’ variable and wealthier countries have higher scores on the ‘GDP per capita’ variable). Accordingly, the subsequent analysis will also work with the alternative specification of GDP per capita instead of net budget status in an attempt to assess the effect of a possible ‘North-South’ cleavage on Council behavior.

Accordingly, the main model to be estimated in the subsequent analysis is:

$$ v(\mu) = \beta_1 + \beta_2 \times \text{Government Left-Right Position} + \beta_3 \times \text{Support for European Integration} + \beta_4 \times \text{Net Budget Status} + \beta_5 \times \text{Voting Weights} + \beta_6 \times \text{Presidency} + \epsilon_i $$

An alternative model, however, will substitute the variable ‘GDP per capita’ for ‘Net Budget Status.’

In general, governments were much more likely to agree with the Council majority than to oppose it in the period from 1995 to 2004, illustrating the force of consensus decision making in the Council. Table 1 provides an overview of probabilities for the three possible outcome categories (‘yes’, ‘abstain’, and ‘no’).

[Table 1 about here]

The overall probability of different vote choices (as calculated from the mean of the determining variables) indicates that the probability of voting ‘yes’ is by far the largest ($p=0.9796$), essentially approaching a probability of one. By comparison, the overall probability of abstaining is only 0.0066 and finally, the probability of voting ‘no’ is 0.0138. In practice, this implies that decision making by consensus strongly determines patterns of
voting behavior in the Council. However, regarding the remaining probabilities, in which way do the potential explanatory variables described above affect vote choice? Table 2 presents the results for two models based on the full data set (due to possible inadequacies regarding estimates based on all data, a refined analysis will be presented later): model 1 as specified above and an alternative model (model 2) in which government left-right positioning is replaced by relative government left-right position.

Table 2 about here

The analysis of the full set of Council voting records from 1995 to 2004 (Table 2), using all vote outcome data without corrections, shows that indeed, each of the independent variables integrated into the main model (model 1) has a significant effect on vote choice in the Council. The significant effects, however, might partially be related to the fact that some data points are repeated in the data set (such as those for country characteristics over the relevant time span). For the analysis of the full data set, in a comparison of the ‘extreme values’ of the dependent variable -- i.e. the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ vote choices -- the coefficients displayed appear to demonstrate that in accordance with effects hypothesized earlier, governments located more to the right on the left-right policy scale are more inclined to oppose the Council majority. Similarly, larger countries are shown to have a higher probability to oppose the majority in Council decision making, as the positive (and significant) coefficients for these variables indicate. Net budget status has a negative effect on the probability that an EU state will oppose the Council majority (i.e. the more a member state is a ‘net receiver’, the less likely it is to vote ‘no’ in formal Council voting procedures).

In addition, governments buttressed by strong domestic public support for EU integration oppose the majority less frequently than do governments facing a more Euroskeptic public. Finally, if an EU state holds the presidency, it is less likely to oppose the Council majority. However, as the empirical results of model 2 demonstrate, in contrast to earlier studies, it is not absolute left-right positioning that affects a government’s probability to oppose the majority in the Council, but relative positioning that matters: including relative positioning into the model renders the effect of absolute left-right positioning insignificant.

In contrast to multivariate models in which the dependent variable is continuous, the coefficients displayed in Table 2 cannot provide information about the effects of a unit-change in independent variables on vote choice. In order to assess the effect of an one-unit increase in an independent variable on the probability of the respective government choosing one of the three vote options, it is necessary to assess the appropriate density functions at relevant points and to multiply them by the coefficient estimates associated with the
respective variables.\textsuperscript{16} Table 3 gives an overview of the respective marginal effects for model 2.

Although the substantive effects are small, as table 3 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 will be to either abstain or vote ‘no’ in the Council. Stronger support for integration in domestic public opinion marginally increases the likelihood that a government will vote with the majority and decreases the probability that it will either abstain or vote ‘no’. Similarly, the more an EU state is a net receiver of the EU budget, the more likely it is to vote with the majority and the less inclined it is to either abstain or vote ‘no’. The larger an EU state (i.e. the larger its number of votes in the Council), the less likely it is to vote with the majority and the higher the probability that it will either abstain or cast a negative vote in formal voting procedures. Finally, the effect of the dummy variable ‘Presidency’ indicates that countries that held the Presidency in a given year were less likely to abstain or cast a negative vote in the Council and more likely to agree with the majority.

Substituting the variable ‘GDP per capita’ for ‘Net Budget Status’ in the main model generates significant results for all variables included in this alternative model specification, with the exception of the new variable (‘GDP per capita’) itself. Hence, levels of GDP per capita do not seem to be a good predictor of vote choice in the Council, while the related (but not identical) measurement ‘Net Budget Status’ is.

Given that authors have indicated that there may be a combined effect of left-right positioning and support for EU integration on government vote choice in the Council, the current analysis has included an interaction term in the models with the intention of testing for this possibility. Similarly, an interaction effect 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. In order to see whether left-right positioning and support for integration might be related in other, possibly non-linear ways, figure 1 shows a two-dimensional display of these variables for 1995 to 2004.

\textsuperscript{16} E.g. see Borooah (2002). In the subsequent analysis, assessments will be made by setting the values of all other explanatory variables to their mean.
Government left-right scores based on the Hunt-Laver-Benoit data set are somewhat truncated at a value of around eight on the one to twenty scale. But indeed, as Figure 1 illustrates, an ‘inverted U-curve’ can be discerned for governments located in the center and right-of-center on the left-right policy scale: those located in the center of the relevant scale segment seem to face higher levels of public support for European integration. This result is somewhat remarkable, as the analysis uses fresh data to test the potential relation between support for EU integration and government left-right positioning and confirms some earlier insights into this theme.

The paper so far has included all available data on vote positions in the Council into the quantitative exploration. However, in practice, some outcomes -- ‘no’ and ‘abstain’ -- are much less likely to occur in Council voting than is ‘yes’. In addition, some data points are repeated in the data set. It is conceivable that measurements of standard errors are influenced by this distribution of data patterns and vote outcomes in the overall data set. In order to correct this potential bias, and to provide a supplementary assessment, the following analysis will include only a selection of the full data set: it will use the 665 cases in the 1995 to 2004 time span in which a government of an EU state abstained or cast a negative vote in Council voting. In addition to this, on the basis of random selection, it will include 665 other cases from the remainder of the full data set.18

Table 4 presents the results of this analysis. Clearly, on the basis of this smaller data set, accounting for the fact that opposition in Council voting essentially constitutes a ‘rare event’, the assessment still provides estimates that largely correspond with the earlier findings as presented above. Only the explanatory variable ‘presidency’ no longer generates significant results. All other variables, in essence, indicate significant coefficient estimates for the direction of effects as described above.

5. Conclusions

What determines voting behavior in the Council of the EU? What kinds of formal and informal effects are relevant in this institution? This paper assesses governments’ overall probability to support a majority decision, abstain or vote ‘no’ in Council decision making. In addition, it explores possible systematic factors that may determine governments’ choice to

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17 This random selection has been achieved by the construction of a random numbers table and subsequent extraction of these entries from the overall data set.
either cast negative votes in the Council or abstain when formal votes are taken. The paper builds on earlier analyses exploring this issue and assesses the potential effect of several independent variables.

The paper, however, extends earlier work by using data for the 1995 to 2004 time period for several independent variables on a yearly basis, including government left-right positioning according to two different methods of measurement, net budget status and domestic support for European integration. In this sense, it aims to refine earlier assessments.

Clearly, the probability of a government choosing the option ‘yes’ in Council voting procedures is high, confirming the importance of ‘consensus culture’ in Council practice. Regarding the remaining probabilities for vote choice, the results of the ordered probit regression applied to both the full data set and a random selection of data point on voting behavior in the Council between 1995 and 2004 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 disconfirmed. 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, and larger EU states, are more likely to abstain or vote ‘no’ in formal Council voting procedures. By comparison, net recipients of the EU budget as well as EU states that hold the Presidency in a specific year, tend to oppose the majority (i.e. abstain or vote ‘no’) less frequently. In contrast to earlier studies, however, as regards government left-right positioning, this study indicates that it is not absolute left-right placement that matters but relative positioning as regards the propensity of governments to oppose the majority in EU Council voting.; the further a government is situated from the average EU government left-right location, the higher its probability to oppose the Council majority. This intuitively plausible relation is confirmed in the more systematic empirical study as presented here.

Formal models may not fully explain voting patterns in the Council. 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, may influence the propensity of governments to either cast negative votes or abstain in formal Council voting procedures. However, although assessed effects are small, the analysis presented in this study reveals that a systematic (quantitative) exploration of possible factors influencing vote choice in the Council illustrates that cleavages relevant in other areas of EU politics, including the left-right policy division, the integration-independence dimension, and a ‘North-South cleavage’, may also affect voting behavior in the Council of the EU.

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18 The analysis follows a suggestion by King and Zeng (2001) as regards logistic regression in rare events data.
The ‘rare events’ assessment, however, no longer provides significant results for the Presidency variable.
References


Figure 1: Support for European Integration (Public Opinion) and Government Left-Right Positioning, 1995 to 2004
Table 1: Mean Probabilities of Vote Choice, 1995-2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vote Choice</th>
<th>Probability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vote=Yes</td>
<td>0.9796018</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vote=Abstain</td>
<td>0.0065778</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote=No</td>
<td>0.0138204</td>
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Table 2: Ordered Probit on Vote Choice in the Council of the European Union, 1995 to 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanatory Variables</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coefficient (Std. Err.)</td>
<td>Coefficient (Std. Err.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Left-Right Position</td>
<td>.0122 * (.0066)</td>
<td>.0052 (.0070)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position on Left-Right Dimension Relative to Mean</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.0353 ** (.0137)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for European Integration (Public Opinion)</td>
<td>-.0029 *** (.0008)</td>
<td>-.0029 *** (.0008)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Net Budget Status</td>
<td>-.0562 *** (.0155)</td>
<td>-.0555 *** (.0156)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Voting Weight</td>
<td>.0329 *** (.0067)</td>
<td>.0273 *** (.0070)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presidency</td>
<td>-.1600 *** (.0595)</td>
<td>-.1393 ** (.0601)</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Cut-off Score 2</td>
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<td>-3022.3064</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.0000</td>
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<td>n</td>
<td>27339</td>
<td>27339</td>
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</table>

* p < 0.1, ** p< 0.05, *** p< 0.01
Table 3: Marginal Effect of a One Unit Increase in Explanatory Variables on Vote Choice  
(Calculated at Mean of Determining Variables), Council Voting 1995 to 2004 (Model 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanatory Variable</th>
<th>Yes (Std. Err.)</th>
<th>Abstain (Std. Err.)</th>
<th>No (Std. Err.)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Government Left-Right Position</td>
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<td>.0000697 (.00009)</td>
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<td>Position on Left-Right Dimension Relative to Mean</td>
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<td>.0011514 ** (.00045)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support for European Integration (Public Opinion)</td>
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<td>-.0000389 *** (.00001)</td>
<td>-.000095 *** (.00003)</td>
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<td>Net Budget Status</td>
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<td>-.0007423 *** (.00021)</td>
<td>-.0018105 *** (.0005)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Voting Weight</td>
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<td>.0003644 *** (.0001)</td>
<td>.0008889 *** (.00023)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presidency(^1)</td>
<td>.0057664 *** (.00222)</td>
<td>-.0017079 ** (.00068)</td>
<td>-.0040585 *** (.00155)</td>
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</table>

\(^*\) p < 0.1, \(^**\) p < 0.05, \(^***\) p < 0.01

1. Dy/dx is for a discrete change of this dummy variable from 0 (no Presidency) to 1 (Presidency).
Table 4: Ordered Probit on Vote Choice in the Council of the European Union, 1995 to 2004 (Rare Events Analysis)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanatory Variables</th>
<th>Coefficient (Std. Err.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Position on Left-Right Dimension Relative to Mean (Data Laver-Hunt-Benoit)</td>
<td>0.0563 ** (.0271)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support for European Integration (Public Opinion)</td>
<td>-0.0054 *** (.0017)</td>
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<td>Net Budget Status</td>
<td>-0.0751 ** (.0290)</td>
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<td>Voting Weight</td>
<td>0.0237 * (.0143)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presidency</td>
<td>-0.1007 (.0756)</td>
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<td>Cut-off Score 1</td>
<td>-0.0100 (.1144)</td>
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<td>Cut-off Score 2</td>
<td>0.4256 (.1149)</td>
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</table>

Log likelihood  -1108.597  
LR Chi2(5)       50.66  
Prob > Chi2      0.0000  
Pseudo R2        0.0223  
n               1118  

* p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01
Appendix:

**Table A1: Correlation Matrix (Independent Variables)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>GovLR_RMS</th>
<th>GovLR_LHB</th>
<th>Public_Opinion</th>
<th>Budget</th>
<th>GDP_Cap</th>
<th>Pop_Size</th>
<th>Voting_Weight</th>
<th>Dist_AvRMS</th>
<th>Dist_AvLHB</th>
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