



Executive Politics as Usual: Role Behaviour and Conflict Dimensions in the College of European Commissioners

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Abstract

While role behaviour and conflict dimensions in the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union have been fairly well documented, studies on the internal functioning of the College of the European Commission have been almost lacking. Thus, highly inconsistent images exist; ranging from portraying Commissioners as mainly independent Europeanists on the one hand, to seeing them as primarily national ‘ambassadors’ on the other. Although the main purpose of this article is to theorise College behaviour, some exploratory data indicate that Commissioners first and foremost champion their sectoral portfolio interests, while at the same time, although variably, being attentive to their collective responsibility within the Commission, their country of origin as well as their political party. Theoretically, Commissioners’ decision behaviour is accounted for by considering the organisational structure, demography, locus and culture within which they are embedded, as well as the type of policy they are dealing with. It seems as if politics in the College has much in common with politics within national cabinets.

Images of the European Commission

There are indeed many images out there, among scholars as well as in political life, of how the European Commission (Commission) actually works. Some authors have portrayed it as being permeated by national interests at all levels (Kassim and Wright 1991; Peterson 1999; Menon 2003). Others emphasize that although Commissioners' nationality certainly may have an impact on their preferences on some occasions, Commissioners, for the most part, approach and undertake their duties and tasks in an impartial manner (Nugent 2001: 115). Most authors, however, do not make an assessment of the relative weight assigned to national interests, Commission interests, portfolio interests or party political concerns in the College of Commissioners (Coombes 1970; Donnelly and Ritchie 1994; Ross 1995; Cini 1996; Page 1997; Hooghe 2001; Peterson 2002; Smith 2003; Peterson 2004). Thus, the College seems, in several respects, to be a 'black box' in the scholarly literature. This becomes even more evident when comparing with other key EU institutions. Much more empirical knowledge is available on how the Union Council and the European Parliament actually work. Studies of these institutions have revealed that while contestation along national lines seems to prevail in the Council (Thomson et al. 2004), politics in the Parliament reflects mainly a left-right dimension (Hix 2001).

The obscurity around how those at the Commission's helm are really behaving may also be seen as reflected in the public debate, not least in the heated arguing over the composition of the College that took place at, and subsequent to, the Convention on the future of Europe. The fact that some governments were willing to give up 'their' permanent Commissioner (e.g., the 'inner six'), while others were fiercely against a rotation system (e.g. the ten new member states), could at least be interpreted as mirroring considerable confusion about how the body actually works (cf. *European Voice*, 23-29 October 2003; 6-12 November, 2003).

There certainly is, therefore, an urgent need for clarification: How are Commissioners actually behaving at College meetings? Which roles are evoked and which cleavages are discernable? This is not to say that Commissioners are not participating in other important arenas as well. However, the weekly College meetings should without doubt deserve to be focussed on exclusively. Partly inspired by scholars who have previously studied the role behaviour of ministers in national cabinets (Olsen 1980;

Searing 1994), I will investigate the extent to which Commissioners champion the collective interests of their institution, their particular portfolio interests, national ('constituency') concerns, or party political interests. The extent to which they pursue portfolio, national or partisan interests indicates whether conflicts within the College tend to occur along portfolio, national or partisan lines. It is equally important to try to understand and explain in theoretical terms their behaviour and the conditions under which certain ways of acting might be more frequently observed than others. One of the reasons for the overt confusion in the academic literature about how the College actually works might very well be that the topic has been heavily undertheorised so far, thus making it hard to interpret various empirical observations in a meaningful and systematic way.

It is here suggested that our understanding may be considerably enhanced by taking into consideration the organisational setting within which Commissioners are embedded. This environment imposes multiple, often competing, role expectations on them. A careful examination of the characteristic features of this setting and the types of policy that are dealt with in the College might provide some cues for sorting out the circumstances under which some roles are evoked more often than others. I proceed from here by first introducing the general theoretical framework and by characterising the College along key organisational (independent) variables. The main purpose of this article is indeed to theorise College behaviour. However, I also outline a method by which actual behaviour in such a setting might be observed. Some exploratory data on Commissioners' behaviour (dependent variable) in the College will then be presented for illustrative purposes, and the results discussed in relation to the predictions made.

Theorising Commissioners' behaviour

If we take as our point of departure the legal rules that are meant to govern Commissioners' behaviour in the College, we would expect them to make decisions solely with a view to what might be defined as being in the interest of Europe. According to Article 213 (EC Treaty), 'Members of the Commission shall, in the general interest of the Community, be completely independent in the performance of their duties', and 'they shall neither seek nor take instructions from any government or from any other body.' Liberal intergovernmentalists seem to share this view on

Commissioners as *independent actors*, although with a clearly circumscribed mandate (Moravcsik 1998). In fact, neo-functionalists, historical-institutionalists and principal-agent analysts as well could probably subscribe to the same expectation, although in their view the Commission would, due to ‘locking in’ mechanisms and information asymmetry, have more scope for acting according to its *own* will (Sandholtz and Stone Sweet 1998; Pierson 1996; Pollack 2004). Those adhering to more classical intergovernmentalism, on the other hand, will probably tend to interpret College behaviour as more ‘COREPER like’ behaviour (cf. Cini 2003).

Seen from an organisational theory perspective, one has to ‘unpack’ individual actors’ organisational context in order to account for their actual behaviour, interests and loyalties (Egeberg 2003; 2004). There are four key organisational factors to be taken into consideration in this respect; namely organisational structure, organisational demography, organisational locus and institutionalisation. An *organisational structure* is a normative (role) structure that imposes codified expectations as regards the decision behaviour of the various role incumbents. The logic of appropriateness, incentives and bounded rationality are the mechanisms that are supposed to connect role expectations and actual behaviour (March and Olsen 1989; Searing 1994; Simon 1965). Organisations that require participation on a full time basis (‘primary structures’) and that provide permanent posts are more likely to significantly affect participants’ interests and loyalties than organisations made up of part-timers (‘secondary structures’) and temporary positions.

Most organisational structures are specialised. Thus, they assign ‘sub-roles’ to most members, thereby inserting permanent tensions between the whole and its parts (multiple roles). In general, a positive relationship exists between a person’s hierarchical rank and his or her identification with the organisation as such (Egeberg and Sætren 1999). However, even among those of highest rank loyalties are split between the organisation as a whole and the parts of which they are in charge. The relative emphasis given to the two levels in this respect will depend on, among other things, the amount of organisational capacity devoted to coordination and to the person at the very top.

It also matters *how* organisations are specialised. While specialisation in itself entails the emergence of particular portfolio interests, the chosen principle of specialisation tends to determine the substance of these interests. For example, in organisations that are structured according to geography, decision-makers are likely to emphasise the concerns of particular territories and to focus attention along geographical cleavages, while in entities arranged by sector or function participants tend to pursue sectoral or functional interests and to perceive the world as divided primarily along sectoral or functional lines (Gulick 1937; Egeberg 2003).

‘*Organisational demography*’ refers to the composition, in terms of basic attributes such as age, sex, ethnicity, nationality and education of the social entity under study (Pfeffer 1982: 277). In addition, the former, present (e.g. length of service) and future careers of organisational members are included. When it comes to accounting for decision behaviour in organisations, these demographic factors interact with each other and with structural variables in a complicated manner. For example, participants’ backgrounds are supposed to be more important in organisations characterised by short term contracts than in entities with life-long career patterns, and more important within secondary structures than within primary structures. Thus, empirical studies of public bureaucracies have in general revealed rather weak relationships between officials’ background and their actual decision behaviour (Meier and Nigro 1976; Lægreid and Olsen 1984). Also, a wide variety of experiences acquired outside the organisation are not particularly relevant to policy disputes taking place within it. Only when a very clear ‘representational linkage’ exists can we expect a background factor to affect significantly a person’s organisational behaviour (Selden 1997).

By ‘*organisational locus*’ is meant the physical location, space and structure of an organisation. Studies have revealed some independent impact of locus on organisational members’ contact patterns, coordination behaviour and identities (Pfeffer 1982: 260-71; Egeberg 2003; Egeberg and Sætren 1999). The number of unplanned meetings among decision-makers is particularly sensitive to how the physical setting is arranged. Thus, for example, the amount of attention leaders pay to the concerns of their respective portfolios versus the organisation as a whole may be

partly affected by whether they are located on the premises of their departments or situated together as a leadership group.

According to Selznick (1957), *institutionalisation* means that organisations are growing increasingly complex by adding informal norms and practices, and that they become infused with value beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand (pp. 17-22). Thus, only the emergence of informal norms that underpin an organisation's transition from being a pure instrument for somebody else to becoming a principal in itself (its process of 'autonomisation') can be seen as part of an institutionalisation process in a strict sense. Informal norms may accentuate role expectations codified in the organisational structure. However, such norms may also challenge this structure.

In addition to the organisational factors discussed above, the *type of policy* dealt with should be taken into consideration in order to account for the actual behaviour of decision-makers. According to Lowi (1964), 'policy determines politics'. Thus, for example, we would expect issues dealing with the role and competence of the focal institution in an overall system of governance to evoke 'organisation-wide' roles, while sectoral policies would activate more particularistic roles. In a similar vein, some kinds of items on the agenda could be thought to establish a more obvious 'representational linkage' than others.

Assumptions about Commissioners' behaviour

In order to make qualified assumptions about College behaviour we have to take as our point of departure the values that Commissioners have on the independent variables outlined above. At the outset, since Commissioners find themselves at the very top of an organisation that also constitutes their primary structure, we would expect them to primarily champion the collective interests of their institution. Among the factors that pull in the same direction are their collective responsibility, their *cabinets* which are supposed to monitor all portfolios, the president's privilege to distribute and redistribute dossiers and to ask individual Commissioners to step down, and the fact that the president concentrates on coordination tasks by having the Secretariat General as his sole portfolio.

However, Commissioners are in charge of specialised portfolios that probably require more time and energy than the weekly College meetings. In addition, the Commissioners under study (the Prodi Commission) are physically located with their respective services. Therefore, in most cases, Commissioners are supposed to assume more narrow portfolio roles rather than an institution-wide role. Since portfolios are arranged according to sector or function, we expect portfolio interests to be equivalent to sectoral or functional interests. Had the Commission been organised by geography (as the UK central government's Scottish and Welsh offices reflect), we would expect the concerns of particular territories to be at the forefront.

Most Commissioners are at the same time affiliated to political parties which might as well impose particular role expectations on them. Over time, the College has been increasingly composed of political heavyweights (MacMullen 2000). The College under study (N=20) consisted of 15 former ministers and 15 former parliamentarians. Only one member was without any known party affiliation. Commissioners occasionally confirm their political identity for a wider audience by attending meetings convened by their respective European party federations, or party groups in the European Parliament 1). Finally, if we add the enhanced role assigned to the European Parliament as regards the appointment of College members, and, in particular, the growing importance of the results of the European elections in this respect, we could indeed expect the party role to become more salient among Commissioners. However, notwithstanding these small steps in the direction of parliamentarism: under the current 'regime' their party affiliation is supposed to be of less relevance in most decision situations.

What room is left then for the role of nationality? Like national cabinet ministers Commissioners have in a sense territorial constituencies (Searing 1994). We can expect both to be attentive to the concerns of these territories, although neither ministers nor Commissioners are allowed to take instructions from them. While national cabinets informally may strive to reach a certain geographical balance as regards their composition, this is formalized in the Commission. Thus, the role that nationality might play in the College has to be somewhat ambiguous and delicate: On the one hand, as already said, the organisational structure within which Commissioners find themselves could be expected to largely decouple their decision

behaviour from their origins. Also, the informal norms and culture that have developed in the College mainly seem to underpin the formal arrangement in this respect: Commissioners should avoid overt nationalism (Cini 1996: 111), too close relationships with member states (Donnelly and Ritchie 1994: 35) and ‘COREPER-like behaviour’ (Joana and Smith 2004: 2). In addition, since regulatory policy seems to be the dominant type of policy at the EU level (Majone 1991), national interests may often be hard to specify. Compared to budgetary matters, winners and losers can, in general, be less clearly identified as far as regulatory policy is concerned (Peters 1992).

On the other hand, when issues having obvious implications for a particular country *are* in fact dealt with, a ‘representational linkage’ might nevertheless occur. In addition, since Commissioners are on temporary contracts, concerns related to future career prospects could possibly interfere in a given decision situation. As regards the College under study, about half of the members might very well have a future political career at the Commission or in their country of origin (EuropeanVoice.com, 29 January 2004). However, since governments may change during Commissioners’ stay in Brussels, being attentive to the concerns of the government which nominated them is far from any guarantee for being reappointed or appointed somewhere else.

Methodological approach

Given the relatively small number of Commissioners it would hardly make sense to do a statistical analysis of this group as such. I decided instead to use key informants who were asked to report on five-point scales how frequently the four roles (‘commission role’, ‘portfolio role’, ‘country role’, ‘party political role’) were actually evoked at College meetings, without, however, unveiling the behaviour of individual Commissioners. They were asked to make this assessment as regards five different types of policy that Commissioners deal with; namely sectoral (regulatory) policies, budgetary matters, institutional policy, administrative policy and personnel policy. ‘Institutional policy’ designates Commission statements on the overall role and competence of the various EU institutions, while ‘administrative policy’ is mainly about internal reform. In addition, the interviewees were asked to characterise role behaviour when topics on the agenda clearly could have distributional consequences along national lines (‘geographical policy’). This might sometimes be the case within

all the five issue areas mentioned above, but, in addition, cohesion policy, location decisions and the like are of course subsumed into this policy category.

In order to select informants, I decided to approach top officials, all from the Secretariat General (SG), who usually sit in at College meetings. Compared to Commissioners and *cabinet* members (who may sit in occasionally), SG officials are, arguably, more 'neutral' observers of the proceedings. The interviewees include four who cover the Prodi Commission (the focus of this study) and one from the Delors period. The interviewee from the Delors period provided background information on College behaviour. Three of the informants were very experienced Commission officials. Three had previously also served as *cabinet* members, and in that capacity they had also occasionally attended College meetings. I started by sending them a letter (winter/spring 2004) in which I shortly described my project. Attached to the letter followed the standardised form which presented the four roles, the frequency scales, and the various types of policy areas to be considered. After some days I phoned them and made appointments for interviewing. During the interview, the interviewee had the form in front of her or him. Thus, since variable values are numbered (1-5), there was virtually no room left for misinterpreting their answers. The level of convergence among responses turned out to be high. This fact gave me the idea that the most reliable and transparent way of presenting the results probably would be to emphasise (in bold) the most 'representative' variable values directly in the form used for interviewing. Where clear divergence among responses appeared, I have chosen a value in between or simply marked out two (neighbouring) values instead of only one. This could not be done, however, without making some hard judgments. In this respect, I considered, for example, whether only one informant 'dissented' or not, and the amount of experiences from the College the 'dissident' could draw on when making her or his assessment. Those presenting interview data in a more unstandardised manner are of course facing similar difficulties as regards the selection and weighing of various observations. However, such problems probably become more highlighted when applying the method proposed here. Related to the standardised form, I also recorded the interviewees' more broad and qualitative reflections around College behaviour. In addition, I asked the informants about the potential impacts Commissioners' past and future careers and physical location might have on their role enactment.

Even if most of the informants are rather experienced people, one can easily imagine that it's no simple task to perceive and register Commissioners' behaviour. Which role they actually assume at College meetings might be a highly subtle affair. In particular, since pursuing national interests are, in general, deemed inappropriate in the Commission setting (see above), Commissioners could be expected to try to disguise these kinds of motives by instead taking positions that are normatively justifiable. According to Elster (1998: 104), however, when doing this, they will tend to argue for a position that differs somewhat from their ideal point since a perfect coincidence between private (here: national) interest and impartial argument is suspicious. Nevertheless, there is a danger for a certain underreporting of the 'country role'.

How Commissioners seem to behave in College

The College under study voted between six and ten times a year (INTERVIEWS). Thus, given the hundreds of items that are on the agenda each year for the weekly meetings 3), the decisional style seems extremely consensus-oriented. We cannot, however, on the basis of voting frequency, infer that Commissioners most of the time agree to what becomes the official Commission line, as a result of more or less extensive deliberation. We know that 'dissidents', instead of pushing for a vote, can be satisfied with having their disagreement recorded in confidential minutes (INTERVIEW). In this study we confine ourselves to focus on the interests that Commissioners actually pursue at College meetings, and how their behaviour in this respect might be accounted for.

Table 1

Sectoral (regulatory) policy: How frequently the four roles are evoked in College

| | Frequently | | | Seldom | |
|-----------------|------------|----------|----------|----------|---|
| Commission role | 1 | <u>2</u> | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Portfolio role | <u>1</u> | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Country role | 1 | 2 | <u>3</u> | 4 | 5 |
| Party role | 1 | 2 | 3 | <u>4</u> | 5 |

Since sectoral or regulatory policies are by far the most common types of policy at the College's agenda then (INTERVIEW), it seems quite natural to start by looking at the frequency with which the various roles are evoked within this domain (Table 1). The consistency among the ratings given by the different informants was extremely high in this case, something which is expressed by the fact that I found it highly sufficient to mark out only one value on each variable. Table 1 shows that the 'portfolio role' is most frequently assumed; followed by the 'commission role'. As said, due to the way the Commission structure is specialised, portfolio interests mean in practice sectoral or functional interests. Had the Commission been arranged according to territory, portfolio concerns would have been geographical. The prevalent sectoral or functional orientation of Commissioners is underpinned not only by the internal organisation of the Commission, but also by partly parallel structures found within key institutional interlocutors; like the standing committees of the European Parliament and the ministerial meetings of the Council (INTERVIEW). 4) In addition, the physical location of Commissioners with their respective services may accentuate the 'portfolio role' somewhat to the detriment of collegiality, or the 'commission role' (INTERVIEWS).

Also sectoral and regulatory policies may contain elements that entail clear distributional consequences along national lines. Within the competition policy area, for example, state aid cases could be thought to sometimes trigger a 'representational linkage' between Commissioners and their countries of origin. The same could be true as regards for instance the priority given to various infrastructure projects in the transport sector. Table 1 shows that the 'country role' is in fact assumed, although not frequently. The 'party role' seems even more seldom enacted. Commissioners' party political affiliation can sometimes be demonstrated when, in particular, social policy and state aid cases are on the agenda (INTERVIEWS).

Table 2

Budgetary matters: How frequently the four roles are evoked in College

| | Frequently | | | Seldom | |
|-----------------|------------|----------|----------|----------|---|
| Commission role | 1 | <u>2</u> | <u>3</u> | 4 | 5 |
| Portfolio role | <u>1</u> | <u>2</u> | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Country role | 1 | <u>2</u> | <u>3</u> | 4 | 5 |
| Party role | 1 | 2 | 3 | <u>4</u> | 5 |

Table 3

Institutional policy: How frequently the four roles are evoked in College

| | Frequently | | | Seldom | |
|-----------------|------------|---|----------|----------|---|
| Commission role | <u>1</u> | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Portfolio role | 1 | 2 | <u>3</u> | 4 | 5 |
| Country role | 1 | 2 | <u>3</u> | <u>4</u> | 5 |
| Party role | 1 | 2 | 3 | <u>4</u> | 5 |

As regards budget-making, or issues with clear budgetary implications, Table 2 indicates that the ‘portfolio role’ still is the role most frequently evoked in the College. However, aside from the ‘commission role’, the ‘country role’ appears relatively often within this policy field. Contributors and beneficiaries may usually be more easily identified than in the regulatory field, and this fact makes a ‘representational linkage’ more likely (INTERVIEW). When it comes to the institutional policy area, Commissioners apparently see themselves most of the time as representing the Commission as a whole (cf. Table 3). Sometimes, however, the portfolio role is taken on also within this field, for example when a Commissioner wants to enhance the role of his or her policy sector within the overall constitutional architecture. It also happens, although more seldom, that strongly articulated government positions, as for example on the composition of the College in the Constitutional Treaty, are reflected in Commissioners’ behaviour (INTERVIEWS).

Table 4

Administrative policy: How frequently the four roles are evoked in College

| | Frequently | | | Seldom | |
|-----------------|------------|---|----------|----------|----------|
| Commission role | <u>1</u> | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Portfolio role | 1 | 2 | <u>3</u> | <u>4</u> | 5 |
| Country role | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | <u>5</u> |
| Party role | 1 | 2 | 3 | <u>4</u> | 5 |

Table 5

Personnel policy: How frequently the four roles are evoked in College

| | Frequently | | | Seldom | |
|-----------------|------------|----------|----------|----------|---|
| Commission role | 1 | <u>2</u> | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Portfolio role | <u>1</u> | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Country role | 1 | <u>2</u> | <u>3</u> | 4 | 5 |
| Party role | 1 | 2 | 3 | <u>4</u> | 5 |

The administrative policy field seems to share some of the basic properties with the institutional policy area (Table 4). While the ‘commission role’ is equally dominant, the ‘country role’, however, is even more muted within the administrative field. A possible relationship between the strength of the ‘New Public Management’ (NPM) movement in Commissioners’ home countries and their attitudes towards NPM-inspired reforms at the Commission was hinted at, though (INTERVIEW). Occasionally, enactments of the ‘party role’ can also be observed when change proposals are framed within a NPM ‘paradigm’ (INTERVIEW). The personnel policy area differs significantly from the rest of the administrative field (cf. Table 5). Firstly, the portfolio role is most frequently evoked, and, secondly, Commissioners more often take on the ‘country role’. This behavioural pattern probably reflects that Commissioners strived to enhance, in qualitative as well as quantitative terms, the human resources available within their respective remits, while they simultaneously have a close view to the geographical balance as regards senior officials’ background (INTERVIEWS).

Table 6

Geographical policy: How frequently the four roles are evoked in College

| | Frequently | | | Seldom | |
|-----------------|------------|----------|----------|----------|---|
| Commission role | 1 | 2 | <u>3</u> | 4 | 5 |
| Portfolio role | 1 | 2 | <u>3</u> | 4 | 5 |
| Country role | 1 | <u>2</u> | <u>3</u> | 4 | 5 |
| Party role | 1 | 2 | 3 | <u>4</u> | 5 |

Finally, the informants were asked to assess Commissioners' role behaviour when items that clearly could have distributional consequences along national lines are on the agenda ('geographical policy'). This policy category then could contain elements from all the other policy areas previously discussed, plus quite obvious cases in this respect, like location issues. Table 6 shows a relatively even distribution among the different behaviours, although the 'country role', as expected, seems to be evoked somewhat more frequently than the others. However, even within this policy category, the 'country role' doesn't take a clear lead. Informants emphasised that they, on their arrival at the Commission, had been surprised by the limited role played by nationality at College meetings (INTERVIEWS), although acknowledging that some controversy related to geography might have been solved at the level of *cabinets* (INTERVIEW). The 'commission role' often 'takes the lead at the end of the day', and the *tour de table* often registers a consensus (INTERVIEW). Although the organisational structure as well as the informal norms are highly restrictive as regards the role that nationality might play, it was emphasised that there, nevertheless, are *particular* situations in which a country orientation is deemed more legitimate. This would, for example, be the case if a Commissioner would argue seriously that a certain College decision could mean 'a disaster in the country I know best' (INTERVIEW). Also, a slight relationship might exist between Commissioners' future career plans and their liability to assume the 'country role' (INTERVIEWS).

Conclusion: understanding Commissioners' multiple role behaviour

The exploratory empirical analysis presented here indicates that the College can probably not be portrayed as being permeated by national interests, as claimed by several scholars. Nor do Commissioners seem to act solely in the general European or Commission interest as could be expected by relying on the relevant Treaty

provisions. Instead, this study suggests that the role most frequently evoked in the College is the *'portfolio role'*; i.e. Commissioners tend to champion the interests that are inherently linked to their respective briefs. Since the organisational structure is specialized according to sector or function, these interests happen to be sectoral or functional. They could have been something else, had the arrangement been otherwise. Another key observation is that Commissioners assume *multiple roles*: while the 'portfolio role' seems to be most frequently evoked, both the 'commission role' and the 'country role' are important ingredients of the College's political life. Less visible is the political 'party role', although it is there. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that Commissioners' role behaviour may be contingent upon the type of policy dealt with. For example, by focusing exclusively on 'geographical policy', it could be shown how a 'representational linkage' might push the 'country role' to the fore.

The assumptions about Commissioners' decision behaviour based in organisational theory succeeded well: The organisational setting leads us to expect multiple and, probably, often competing role enactments. By combining relevant ('given') features of the organisational structure, demography and locus, as well as of the informal norms and culture, we seem to be able to predict fairly well the relative weight Commissioners actually assign to various roles in College. By introducing 'policy type or area' as a conditioning factor, we got some additional cues for specifying the conditions under which various roles are in fact activated. Thus, even if this study builds on rather limited data sources and clearly raises delicate methodological issues, the fact that the results are highly comprehensible in theoretical terms nevertheless strengthens their validity.

Although this study empirically focuses on the Prodi Commission, it is basically not a study of this particular College. Rather, it aims at telling us something about how executive politicians behave under certain organisational conditions. Thus, the theoretical model deliberately ignores the impact of other variables; e.g. personal factors. This does not in any sense mean that one holds such factors to be irrelevant; only that they are not accommodated in the model due to parsimony concerns, or, simply, as in this case, inability to see how they can be incorporated in a meaningful way. Concerning the Commission, most observers seem to agree that the personality

of, for example, Jacques Delors did matter (Drake 2000). So, the personal strength of the President could be thought to affect, for instance, the frequency with which the 'commission role' is evoked among the other Commissioners.

Within the model applied in this study, changes in role behaviour are likely to occur subsequent to significant shifts on one or more of the organisational and policy area variables dealt with. Thus, the arrival of a new team of Commissioners does not in itself entail new patterns of decision-making. However, if, for example, they become physically (re-)gathered in the Berlaymont building (as they have), one could expect, other things being equal, a slight strengthening of the 'commission role' to the detriment of the 'portfolio role'. A considerable increase in the number of Commissioners would, on the other hand, probably pull in the opposite direction. If a number of Commissioners are not assigned (sectoral) portfolios of a certain size (e.g. if the number of Commissioners does not match the number of available Directorates General), they will be pulled between the remaining roles. It can be predicted then that the 'country role' will enhance its weight, not only because there are fewer roles left to 'choose' among, but also because the sectoral 'portfolio role' provides *displacement* of the 'country role'. If the number of Commissioners becomes less than the number of Member States, as was the original idea of Jean Monnet (Duchêne 1994: 240), the 'country role' could be down-played because in that case it would become apparently inappropriate to pursue one's national interests. In other words, the normative constraints on the 'representational linkage' might be strengthened further. It is indeed also an intriguing question whether Commissioners from the new Central and Eastern European member countries bring with them particular background experiences (cf. 'organisational demography') that might affect behaviour in the College. For example, given that they have experienced less national autonomy in the past, could one expect them to assign slightly more weight to the 'country role'? And, if so, how sustainable would such a role orientation be within an institution like the Commission?

To conclude, Commissioners' role behaviour seems to have much in common with that of national cabinet ministers; they assume multiple and competing roles whose relative weight may vary contingent upon organisational and policy area variables. Both are highly 'portfolio driven', however, both are simultaneously embedded in a

collegial setting that claims a certain collective responsibility of them. Moreover, Commissioners as well as cabinet ministers have their 'local' community back home which imposes certain expectations on them while in office. The modest role that party political affiliation seems to play in the College may represent the biggest difference between the two. If the Commission's relationship to the European Parliament continues to grow, both as regards the appointment of Commissioners and their daily policy-making, it is reason to believe that more emphasis will be put on this role in future colleges. It should be emphasised, however, that the main purpose of this article has been to theorise College behaviour and to outline a method for observing it. The empirical underpinning is so far rather preliminary.

What further 'normalises' executive politics at the EU level is the fact that portfolios are sectoral or functional rather than territorial. Arguably, national executives have been structured according to sectoral or functional principles in order to displace regional tensions within a country. The emergence of ministries specialized by territory, like the Scottish and Welsh offices within the UK central government, on the other hand, may indicate devolution (Egeberg 2003). Thus, by having achieved considerable institutional autonomy, and by being organised mainly along non-territorial lines, the Commission adds (inter-)institutional and sectoral conflicts to the European level pattern of territorial and ideological cleavages (Moravcsik 1998; Marks and Steenbergen 2004). The extent to which cleavages cross-cutting national lines exist at the European level can be seen as a key indicator of system transformation in Europe (Egeberg 2004).

Notes

1. Sources: 1. Espen Barth Eide, member of the presidency of the Party of European Socialists. 2. One of the interviewees (cf. section on method).
2. Also mentioned by one of the interviewees (cf. section on method),
3. Source: Minutes of Commission meetings 2003 (available on the Commission web site)
4. Although the organisation of the European Parliament and the Union Council clearly embodies sectoral and functional components, this doesn't mean that such components are prevalent within these bodies. The Council, for example, is primarily territorially arranged which, arguably, explains its mainly intergovernmental conflict pattern (Egeberg 2004).

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