

The European Commission in Question

Policy Briefing

2/ Are European Commission officials ‘federalists’?

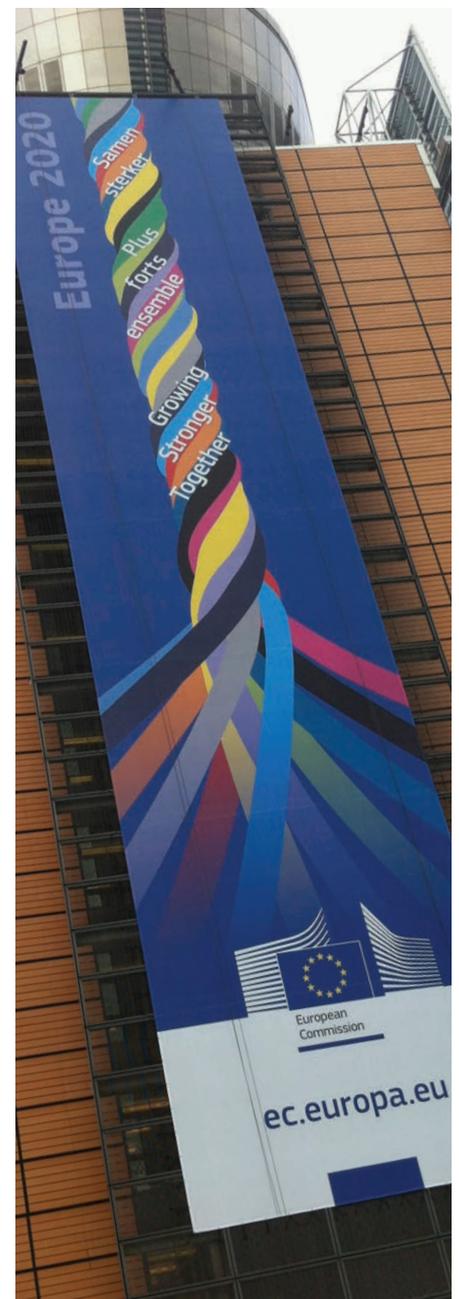
Background

In the British media and elsewhere, the European Commission is depicted as an institution that is inherently expansionist, seeking constantly to extend the competencies of the European Union and therefore its own powers. Similarly, Commission officials are portrayed as ‘federalists’, who want to centralize decision-making authority in Brussels, delight in interfering in the ‘nooks and crannies of daily life’, and nurture a vision of the European Commission as the future government of a United States of Europe.

EUCIQ findings

The European Commission in Question (EUCIQ) sought to test these accepted wisdoms about the Commission and the people who work for it. Specifically, it aimed to discover why officials choose to pursue a career in the Commission, what role they would like the Commission to play in the EU system, and whether they would prefer policy to be made in Brussels or in national capitals. The data collected as part of the project directly challenge the widely held views about the organization and its officials described above. Three findings are especially important:

- First, although a majority of Commission officials join the organization for idealistic reasons, remuneration is also a factor and the quality of the work has become increasingly important;
- Second, Commission officials differ on the political vision of the EU that they prefer;
- Third, Commission officials favour an incremental extension of EU powers, but do not exhibit a general preference for ‘more Europe’. Indeed, most think that there should be ‘less Europe’ in the area of agriculture.



Resources and Further Information

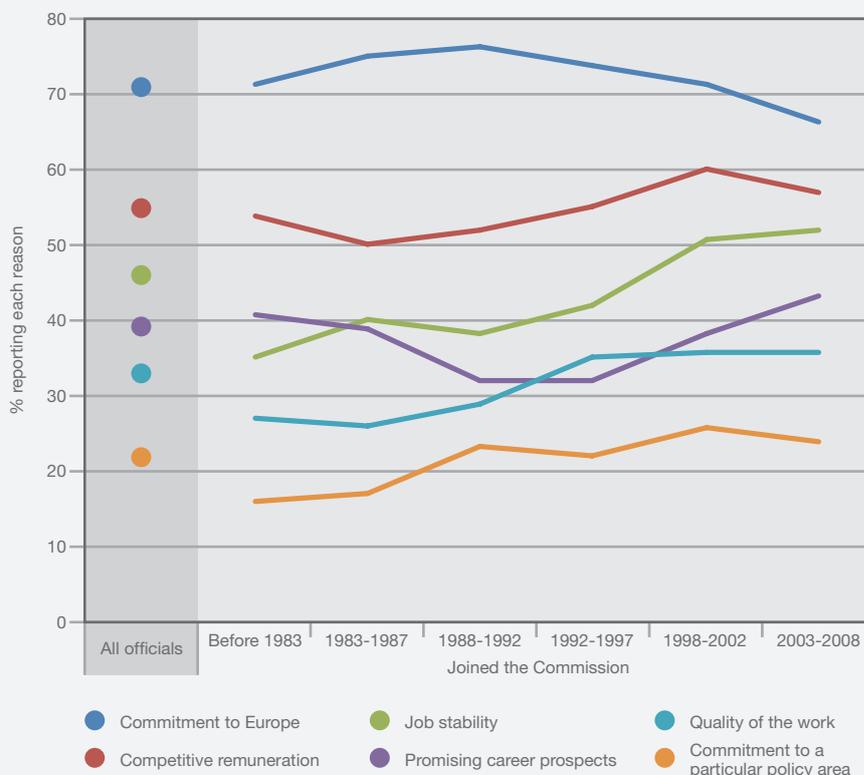
- Contact Principal Investigator: eciciq@uea.ac.uk
- Project website: www.uea.ac.uk/psi/research/EUCIQ
- Publication: tinyurl.com/EUCom21stC
- ESRC project: tinyurl.com/EUCom21stC-ESRC

Motivation

In the online survey, we asked officials why they had decided to follow a career in the European Commission and presented them with an open list of options. The most popular reason, given by more than 70 per cent of respondents, was ‘commitment to Europe’. Over half, meanwhile, cited ‘competitive remuneration’, 45 per cent ‘job stability’ and just under 40 per cent ‘promising career prospects’.

We found no change in the ordering when we examined whether motivations changed over time or whether responses varied between officials according to when they were recruited (see Figure 1). However, for those joining between 2003 and 2008 – the most recent cohort in our survey – the proportion citing ‘commitment to Europe’ fell to a low of 66 per cent whereas the proportion citing ‘job stability’ and ‘promising career prospects’ were at their highest level. The proportion of officials highlighting ‘quality of the work’ and ‘commitment to a particular policy area’ has grown steadily over time.

Figure 1: Motivation for joining the European Commission over time (five-year periods)

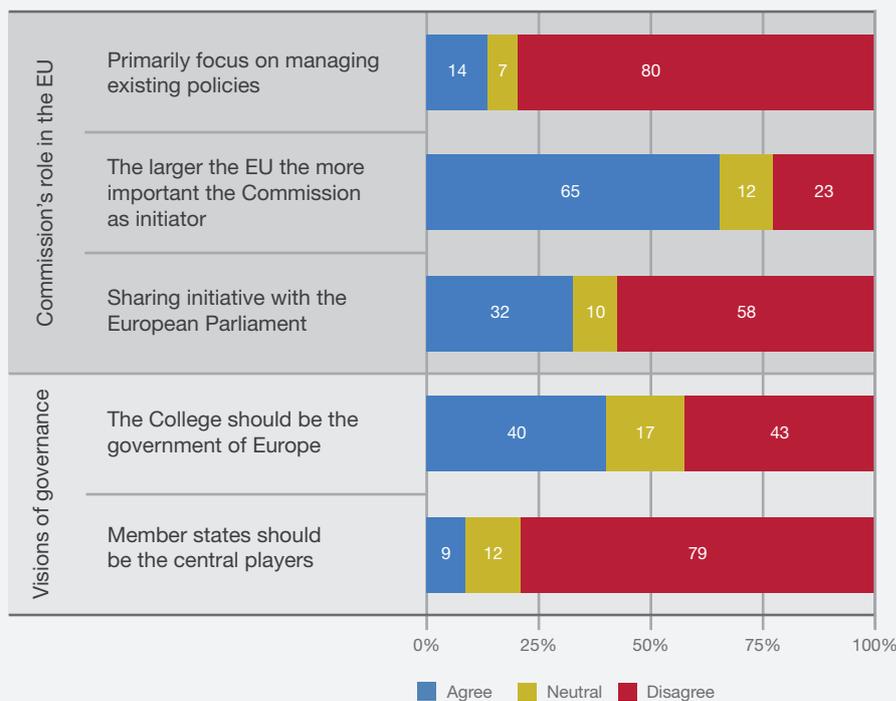


Governance

We were also keen to investigate what officials think about the role that the Commission should play within the EU and what sort of system they would like the EU to be.

First, on the Commission’s responsibilities within the EU, officials generally uphold the traditional role of the Commission as a policy initiator and guardian of the treaties (see Figure 2). In response to the questions we posed in the online survey, 80 per cent disagreed with the proposition that the Commission should focus primarily on managing existing policies rather than developing new ones, and 65 per cent thought that the Commission’s role as a policy initiator increases in importance as the number of member states grows. Nearly a third (32 per cent) believe that the Commission should share its right of initiative with the European Parliament. In other words, a significant proportion of officials do not regard a monopoly over this prerogative as intrinsic to the Commission’s status and, moreover, see the European Parliament as more of a partner than a rival.

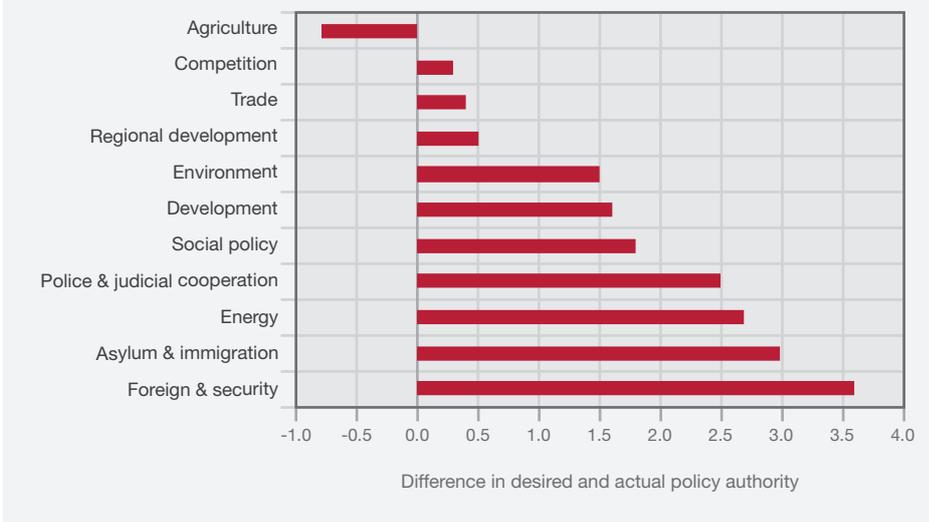
Figure 2: Views on the role of the European Commission and preferred conceptions of the EU



Second, on the question of where power should lie, there was considerably less support for the idea that the Commission should be the central institution than accepted wisdoms about the organization and its staff suggest. Although 40 per cent of officials who responded to the online survey would like the College of Commissioners to become the future government of Europe, they were outnumbered (marginally) by the 43 per cent who disagreed. At the same time, 9 per cent thought the member states, and not the Commission or the Parliament, should be the main players, while 79 per cent disagreed.

Support for the Commission’s traditional role was even more pronounced among managers. A vast majority (over 90 per cent) of the 119 interviewed signaled their preference for an EU where the Commission proposes policy and acts as guardian of the treaties. Only 13 per cent saw the Commission as a future government, while 6 per cent wanted the Commission to be an administration serving the member states. At the same time, there was a somewhat pessimistic mood among managers about what the future holds for the organization. Over one-third predicted that by the end of the next decade the Commission will be an administration serving the member states. Only 6 per cent believed that the Commission was likely to become the government of Europe by 2019.

Figure 3: Difference between where Commission believe where decision-making authority is located and where it should be



Powers

A final set of questions was designed to test whether Commission officials hold expansionist views. In regard to eleven policy areas, officials were asked, first, to indicate on an eleven-point scale where they consider that policy-making authority resides, where 0 represents the national or sub-national level and 10 the EU level. For the same areas and using the same scale, they then were asked where they think that policy-making authority *should* reside. The differences between the two sets of responses – a measure of whether officials think that EU competence should be increased or decreased in relation to its current powers – are shown in Figure 3.

The main finding is that there is no general preference among officials for ‘more Europe’. Indeed, in the case of agriculture, officials think that there is too much ‘Europe’. They would prefer that more decision making in agriculture should take place at the national level. However, officials would like considerably more ‘Europe’ in justice, energy, and asylum, and substantially more in foreign policy. To an extent, these preferences reflect the varying scope of EU responsibility. For example, officials rank agriculture as the second most centralised policy and foreign and security policy as the tenth. In the case of competition and trade, they want ‘more Europe’ even though these are areas where EU competencies are already extensive.

Conclusion

The findings from the EUCIQ project challenge widespread views about the Commission and its staff. Commission officials may join the organization due to idealism about Europe, but their motivation does not reflect or translate into a ‘federalist’ ideology or a desire to centralize power in Brussels. They favour a vision of the EU as a system where the Commission retains its traditional prerogatives as policy initiator and guardian of the treaties, though nearly a third would be happy to share the first with the European Parliament. There is certainly no majority or even a plurality among officials in support of an EU where the College of Commissioners forms a European government. Nor is there evidence of a generalized preference among officials for expanding EU competencies. Officials take a selective view on where they would like to see ‘more Europe’ and in the case of agriculture, richly symbolic for the EU since the Common Agricultural Policy is often considered to be the first European policy, they would prefer to see less.

Sara Connolly, Liesbet Hooghe and Hussein Kassim

About the Project

The European Commission in Question is an ESRC-funded project that examines the origins, backgrounds, and beliefs of officials, the internal operation of the organization, and attitudes to administrative reform and enlargement. Drawing on responses to an online survey administered to a representative sample of Commission officials in the autumn of 2008 (n=1901; n=1820 after iterative proportional fitting); and responses to a structured programme of interviews with Commissioners (n=5), cabinet members (n=28), and middle and senior managers (n=119, including 15 Directors General) conducted in 2009, it answers fundamental questions about one of the world's most powerful administrations.

For further information, see www.uea.ac.uk/psi/research/EUCIQ

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Kassim et al (2013) **The European Commission of the Twenty-First Century**,
Oxford University Press
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