

Unpacking the European Commission: *Cabinet* Composition and EU Policy-Making

WILLIAM T. DANIEL¹  and STEFFEN HURKA² 

¹University of Nottingham, Nottingham ²LMU Munich, Munich

Abstract

We examine bureaucratic politics within the European Commission, using novel data on the backgrounds of individual members of Commissioners' *cabinets*. Although *cabinet* composition has become increasingly regulated in recent decades, its selection remains a key area for personalised political appointments within an organisation more commonly known for its collective responsibility and lack of individual influence. Using data on the personal and professional backgrounds of *cabinet* members since the first Barroso Commission, we trace how administrative reforms meant primarily to 'de-nationalise' the selection of appointees have led to changes in *cabinet* composition. We then explore how *cabinet* composition impacts on the complexity of Commission proposals and its subsequent inter-institutional negotiations. We find that whilst more diversity of Commission cabinets clearly enhances the input legitimacy of the EU's legislative process, it neither benefits nor threatens the quality of the Commission's policy proposals or how they are processed politically.

Keywords: complexity; European Commission; institutions; legislative anticipation; policy-making

Introduction

Bureaucratic politics are an important element of the European Commission's (EC) role in influencing European Union (EU) policy-making (Christiansen, 1997; Coombes, 1970; Hartlapp et al., 2013). Scholars have focused on similarities between the Commission and the national bureaucracies of Europe (Bauer et al., 2021; Kassim et al., 2013; Wille, 2013). They have also investigated the changing character of the Commission's inter-institutional prominence, against the rising power of the European Parliament (EP) and its co-decision status with the Council of the EU (Abélès and Bellier, 1996; Blom-Hansen and Senninger, 2021; Kreppel and Oztas, 2017).

Most of these studies have focused on the Commission's administrative structures. Instead of the overtly national and party-political points of reference promoted by the EP and the Council of the EU, the EC is expected to balance its supranational identity as the progenitor and enforcer of EU law and policy with impartiality. Though scholars have taken note of the EC's internal political dynamics, to speak of the EC and its staff is likely to conjure the image of a faceless functionary, rather than a public political persona. Naturally, the classic caricature of the 'Eurocrat' overly simplifies the active political work taking place inside the EC. Nonetheless, the EC's internal policy-making process persists in being viewed as a 'black box', where proposals are drawn up and collective positions are taken between directorates general (DGs) and a College of Commissioners that rarely seek to draw attention to those who serve them.

This anonymity and depersonalisation can be problematic for wider impressions of the EU, where concerns about transparency and consistency of processes can detract from what Schmidt (2013) refers to as ‘*throughput*’ legitimacy, whereby the legitimacy of policy *inputs* (i.e., the selection or election of policy-makers) aligns with the legitimacy of policy *outputs* (i.e., the policy product). In other words, if we remain ignorant of the actors and behaviours of intra-EC policy-making processes, then we forfeit an appreciation for how its composition matters for policy outcomes. Given what we already know about the connection between individual background and political action in the Council and EP, we should also know more about EC staff members – as political actors – and their own backgrounds.

To do this, we focus on one portion of the EC’s support staff, the members of commissioner *cabinets*. We argue that their background characteristics are important indicators for broader shifts in the EC’s overall composition and thus its behaviour in bureaucratic politics (i.e., Peters, 2018). *Cabinet* members are inherently political in nature (Hartlapp et al., 2013). Unlike rank-and-file DG functionaries, whose positions are rigorously gatekept by a competitive *concours*, *cabinets* are hand-picked by each Commissioner. Initially viewed as teams of national advisors – suspected of working to advance their member state’s interests via their commissioner (at best), or embodying patronage and corruption (at worst) – *cabinet* members are unique within an institution otherwise at pains to project a neutral, or at least balanced, supranationalism. Whilst *cabinet* composition has become increasingly standardised over the past 25 years, we argue that member selection remains a viable indicator for how individual Commissioners view her or his roles.

Although we are not the first to scrutinise *cabinet* members, we offer an original research design that provides a unique level of detail in its longitudinal and observational approaches. Namely, we provide new data on the backgrounds of all *cabinet* members since 2004, which includes Barroso I, Barroso II, Juncker and von der Leyen commissions. Whereas previous work may have explored a single inflection point of change within the EC, we trace a substantially longer trajectory. Where others extrapolate from selected survey questionnaire responses, we provide comprehensive observational data.

We offer systematic evidence that *cabinet* composition has indeed become more diverse, in terms of gender, national origins and professional backgrounds. We demonstrate that *cabinets* have experienced de-nationalisation over time (though not the leading *chefs*), relative to their commissioner. They have also become more professionalised, with notable increases in the key educational and professional areas relevant to EU policy-making. Our data provide more granular insights than is currently available, whilst also setting the course for scholars of other bureaucracies to refocus their energies on the merits of observational career data as a way of capturing institutional change.

Given our normative interest in *throughput* legitimacy in the EC, we also explore the effects of this change on the inter-institutional EU legislative model. Changes in *cabinet* composition were ostensibly created in response to concerns about good governance practice. Accordingly, we examine whether *cabinet* diversity makes any difference in the policy outputs of the EC, whether in terms of the substantive composition of the proposals or in the efficiency of subsequent legislative negotiations. In other words, does *cabinet* composition matter for how the Commission designs its policy proposals? Does it inhibit or enable the EU legislative process?

We find that *cabinet* composition is less consequential for policy outcomes than might be expected. We show that some elements of professional change, such as concentration of members with legal backgrounds, may lead to more complex proposals. However, it appears that the shifting composition of the *cabinets* does not affect the cabinets' ability to anticipate inter-institutional legislative dynamics. We consider this weak empirical result to be substantively reassuring from the perspective of the EU's *throughput* legitimacy. In other words, more transparent nomination rules may be normatively desirable for *cabinets*, but they ultimately have a negligible effect on the policy changes that result from them. More generally, our original usage of administrative background data is a significant empirical innovation that we hope can be applied to other studies of bureaucratic politics, well beyond the EC and the EU.

I. The *Cabinet* and Its Importance

Each Commissioner in the College of the EC is entitled to a *cabinet*. Sharing the name with an analogous system from the French bureaucracy (Egeberg and Heskestad, 2010), the *cabinets* of advisers and support staff numbers half a dozen for ordinary Commissioners and increases to over 10 for the president and their vice presidents (VPs) (Wille, 2013). Whilst previous research has highlighted the key role played by these *cabinets* in the EU policy-making process, there is less clarity on who is selected to serve in them (Gouglas et al., 2017).

Operating separately from the formalised strands of power within the permanent services staff of the DGs, *cabinet* members can wield significant power. As group leaders, *chefs de cabinet* are particularly able to influence what comes before their own Commissioner through weekly 'Hebdo' meetings with other *chefs* (Ross, 1994). Wille (2013) describes their role as the 'shadow managers' of the Commission, with a critical role in the brokering of agreements between *cabinet* briefs. It is therefore important to know who they are.

In the early years of the Commission, the *cabinets* were usually viewed as 'national enclaves' (Michelmann, 1978, p. 482), where Commissioners surrounded themselves with compatriots – essentially working as the administrative outposts of their national governments. This personal selection opened the EC to claims of nepotism and corruption, as demonstrated by former French Commissioner Edith Cresson's selection of a family dentist to advise her own *cabinet* on a sham research contract, which led to the eventual fall of the entire Santer Commission in 1999.

National fault lines also run through the background of *cabinet* selection. For example, the number of German nationals serving in *cabinets* under the Juncker Commission was almost twice what it had been under Barroso (Peterson, 2017), with officials describing a 'creeping Germanification' of the EU's culture (p. 362), and a number of EU institutions now 'German-led as never before' (p. 354). This concentration of a particular nationality amongst political appointees, out of balance with the broader population of functionaries, could be seen as problematic for those interested in the descriptive representation of EU citizens by its bureaucratic functionaries. For these reasons, a series of large-scale reforms to the *cabinet* system has unfolded over recent decades, including requirements for multinational staffing (Deckarm, 2016).

First under the Prodi Commission (1999–2004), reforms attempted a transition away from the national ‘ghettos’ of advisors that would have been familiar to Page (1997) in the late 1990s. These broader so-called ‘Kinnock reforms’ were meant to prepare EC structures for the 2004 enlargement and brought additional tensions about *cabinet* composition to the fore (Ban, 2013). They also required additional professionalisation within the *cabinets*, via the recruitment of permanent civil servants to the *cabinets* on secondment.

The post-enlargement Commission was meant to evoke the best practices of New Public Management and other administrative overhauls in vogue at the time. By implementing a more rigorous salary scale and refocussing recruitment processes to the EC via a meritocratic competitive exam, reforms combatted the inability of many early civil servants of the Commission to integrate into the organisational culture (a process that Shore, 2009, refers to as ‘*engrenage*’ or ‘gearing in’). The failure to integrate within the EC was viewed as a key driver for corruption and nepotism. It also fits with Ban’s (2013) discussion of the smooth operators that formed the so-called ‘*Système D*’ – a clever double entendre for both the Delors team and a popular French expression taken from ‘*se débrouiller*’ (meaning ‘to manage’, as in to make do or find one’s way).

As Stevens and Stevens (2001) discuss, an emphasis on meritocracy within the EC was particularly at odds with the practice of *parachutage* that had been previously present in the *cabinets*, whereby nominated advisors would ‘parachute’ into permanent (oftentimes senior) roles in the EC, following the end of their Commissioner’s term in office. Beyond creating an uneven opportunity structure for professional advancement between permanent civil servants and political nominees, the practice was responsible for the retrenchment of particularised national interests, in a process that Deckarm (2017) euphemistically refers to as promoting ‘the country I know best’.

Desperate to adapt and professionalise EC structures, *cabinet* composition now requires a complex formula to ensure a balanced composition (von der Leyen, 2019):

1. *Cabinets* must reflect the professional, geographic and gender diversity of the EU.
2. Commissioners may have six members of their *cabinets* plus one expert; VPs receive an additional member; executive VPs (EVPs) may have 10 members plus two experts; the high representative for foreign affairs gets an additional expert on top of that; and the president’s *cabinet* is staffed with 12 members and three experts.
3. *Cabinets* should include at least three seconded permanent EU civil servants, increasing to four for VPs, six for EVPs, and seven for the president.
4. *Cabinets* must include members from at least three member states, or five for the larger cabinets.
5. The *chef de cabinet* or their deputy should be of a different nationality to the Commissioner.
6. At least 50% of the Commissioner’s total staff should be women – this includes non-*cabinet*-level employees.

But can these shifts in internal structure be observed through the individual *cabinet* members and their changing composition? And can a shift towards an increasingly diverse composition matter for EC policy outcomes?

II. The Shifting Composition of the *Cabinets*

How do we understand shifts in the *cabinets* over time? Considering the historical progression of *cabinet* composition rules, one way would be to expect a heightened incidence of diversity amongst those selected to staff the *cabinets*. Beyond the stricter rules for national combinations that are now expected, we assume that the professionalisation of the EU institutions will lead to more kinds of career experiences, pre-EU service and that an EU-wide push for gender equality in positions of leadership will impact on the EC similarly to other institutions. In other words, the composition of *cabinets* should become more diverse, over time, across a host of background characteristics.

This assumption is anecdotally supported by a recent interview with a *chef de cabinet* in the von der Leyen commission, who remarked upon how diversity of background is easy to come by now, having ‘received a little bit less than 500 [applications] with a real request to join the *cabinet*’ at the start of term, even with fewer than 10 positions available for them to fill. This meant ‘[needing] to choose people who have a clear insight of the processes, and the way things work’. Like another kind of chef, the interviewee regarded a healthy mixture of different background characteristics as ‘the “soup” in which we had to choose’.¹ If this anecdote is more broadly true, and the rules for *cabinet* appointments are being followed, then we should see an increasingly diverse profile of backgrounds present.

Though seminal work on the effectiveness of the Kinnock reforms suggests that *cabinet* composition did begin to change markedly during the 2009–2014 period (Kassim et al., 2013), more recent research has focussed primarily on the perception of *cabinet* roles in policy-making rather than validating whether such backgrounds have indeed continued to shift (Bauer et al., 2021). Given the focus on national and gender diversity, as well as the premium placed on expertise that can match the meritocratic appointments of the DGs, we expect for cabinets to become more diverse over time. We probe this descriptive expectation, prior to examining the impact of composition on policy outcomes.

Data Collection

We first assemble information on cabinet members across the four most recent Commission administrations (Barroso I, Barroso II, Juncker and von der Leyen). The EC does not maintain a central systematic database of biographical information about its *cabinet* members, therefore making it difficult to reliably go back any further than 2004, given our desire to use only publicly available, observational data resources. We collected this information from a patchwork of sources. Lists of *cabinet* members from previous administrations were extracted from the archived websites of each Commission College (similar to Deckarm, 2017; Egeberg and Heskestad, 2010), and a list of *cabinet* members from the Von der Leyen Commission was assembled from the Official Directory of the European Union (Publications Office of the European Union, 2021) and the current Commission website (European Commission, 2021).

We then collected biographical information about each *cabinet* member from a variety of published resources, including members’ public LinkedIn pages, archived CVs on Commission websites, or bios posted online by publishers, conference organisers and

¹Interview 2, European Commission, Brussels. 3 March 2023.

news outlets in which they appeared. This resulted in a database of over 200 *cabinet* members for each of the four Colleges that we studied and over 800 lines of biographical information in total. In total, the dataset contains 807 *cabinet* members nested in 124 *cabinets*. The data collection protocol is similar to those employed by Egeberg and Heskestad (2010, p. 778) and Deckarm (2016, p. 738) but makes use of the increased availability of this information online. It also does away with laborious procedures of contacting *cabinet* members by email or telephone, which has subjected previous studies on the topic to uneven and unrepresentative response rates.

Our data include all *cabinet* members, including *chefs*, deputies, communications leads and experts. We do not include policy co-ordinators, assistants or special advisors – as these typically work in a more advisory capacity and are more subject to turnover within and beyond the broader Commission services. Given that some *cabinets* experience internal membership turnover, we collect data for those who served at the end of each term (i.e., 2009 for the 2004–2009 Barroso I commission). As the von der Leyen commission is ongoing, data were collected in September 2021, just before the half-way point of the term. When a commissioner resigns from their post early, we capture their membership at the end of their service, using the final version of their archived directory. Due to changes in the Commission's web design and archiving over the years, our data exclude the offices of two commissioners' partial terms – Martine Reicherts (in her second term, ending early in 2018) and Karl de Gucht (in his first and partial term from 2009 to 2010).

Exploring Cabinet Composition

We investigate four different dimensions of cabinet composition, to assess their shifting composition over time. First, we record the gender of the 807 *cabinet* members used in the sample. Next, we determine their national origin and the national origins of the responsible commissioner, the *chef de cabinet* and the deputy *chef de cabinet*. As we are interested in the officials' political socialization, we collect information on whether they have *national political experience* (including appointed or bureaucratic), *international affairs experience* (work as diplomat; civil servant or formal foreign minister; civil servant in developmental aid ministry; former head of state; civil servant in an intergovernmental organization; civil servant in an EU institution, or have been trained in international relations or international affairs), *EU experience* (including work as a *stagiaire* or other role holder within an EU institution) and *elected experience* (at any level requiring them to seek public election). Finally, to assess the mix of expertise within the cabinets, we also capture whether members hold a degree in *Politics and International Relations (IR)* or related degrees in public administration and policy; a degree in *Law* of any kind, including graduate LLM qualifications; and a degree in *Economics*, finance or business administration or none of the above.

Our unified dataset contains information about 807 members from the *cabinets* during Barroso I and II, Juncker and von der Leyen's commissions. We were able to discern country of origin² for 768 members and information on their political and professional experience for 604–682, depending on the variable. Missingness appears to be relatively randomly distributed across both time and *cabinets*, which does help to allay some of

²Several *cabinet* members appeared to have dual nationality. Where multiple countries arose for a given member, we considered where the member spent more time, using public information from members' curriculum vitae.

the problems observed by other previous *cabinet* studies – where selection effects may have driven response rates in the surveys used.

To measure the diversity of Commission cabinets, we use two different approaches. First, to get a sense of the overall diversity of a cabinet regarding a certain feature (e.g., nationality), we calculate the Simpson-Gini-Index for each cabinet and feature. The index is calculated as follows:

$$GS = 1 - \sum_{i=1}^n p_i^2,$$

where p_i represents the share of cabinet members with feature i . Simply put, this measure provides us with the probability that two randomly drawn cabinet members differ regarding the feature of interest, for example, because they come from different member states, have experienced a different political socialization or have a different professional background. A value of 0 therefore indicates perfect homogeneity, for example, a cabinet completely staffed with lawyers. A value of 1 indicates perfect diversity, for example, a cabinet whose members all come from different member states.

Second, we use simple shares of cabinet members' backgrounds to measure the extent to which individual backgrounds dominate the composition of a cabinet. For example, we calculate the share of cabinet members who hold a law degree, the share of members who have political experience at the EU or national level and so on. Since some of the variables of interest display considerable degrees of missingness (in particular, political experience and professional backgrounds), we opt for the most conservative method to measure those properties at the cabinet level and assume that missing cases do *not* have the attribute in question, for example, a law background or national-level experience. Accordingly, the shares we calculate for the different types of political experience and professional backgrounds are *minimum* shares.

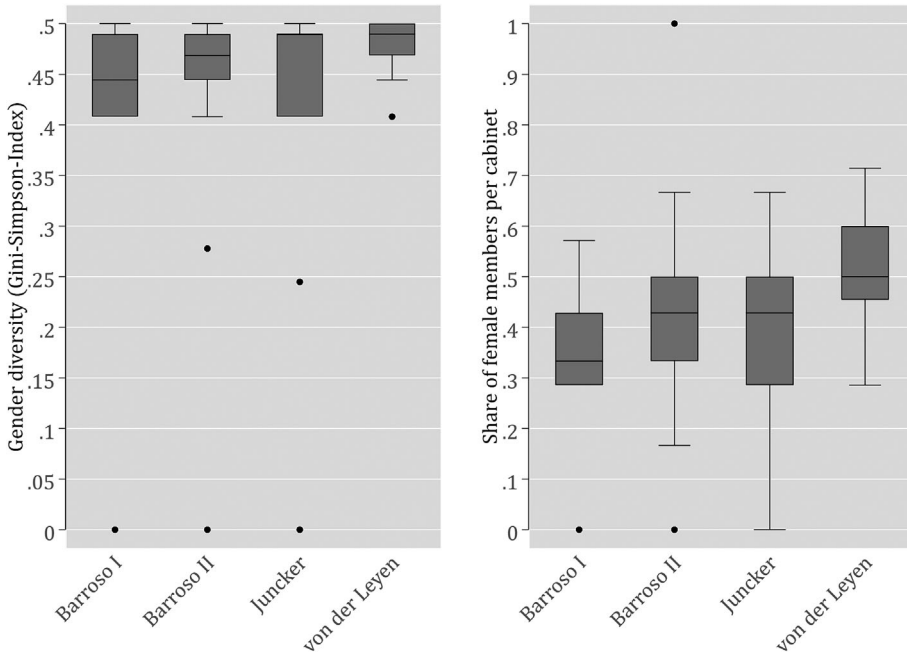
Gender Diversity

As Figure 1 demonstrates, gender diversity has generally been rather high since the first Barroso administration, but it has further increased over the years. The median share of women per cabinet increased from 33.3% in 2004 to 50% in 2019. As the right panel in Figure 1 shows, women today are even in the majority in half of the von der Leyen cabinets, and there is no single all-male cabinet left. In general, variance in gender diversity has been declining, especially when we compare the Juncker and the von der Leyen administrations, as gender diversity becomes a more consistent reality.

National Diversity

Turning to the national diversity of the Commission's cabinets, we see two opposite trends. On the one hand, the upper panels in Figure 2 show that the national composition of Commission cabinets has indeed become slightly more diverse over time. The diversity index (upper left panel) shows a slight upward trend over time. Today, the median probability that two randomly drawn members from a cabinet come from different member states is close to 80%. As the upper right panel additionally illustrates, the share of cabinet members who come from the same member state as the commissioner has been decreasing over time. Parallel to what we observed for gender diversity, it seems like cabinets

Figure 1: Gender Diversity and Share of Women Cabinet Members per EC Administration.



Notes: The left panel illustrates the distributions of the Gini-Simpson-Index on gender diversity. Please note that we use a binary measure for gender. For binary measures, the maximum Gini-Simpson Index value is 0.5. The right panel shows the share of women in the cabinets of the different Commission administrations.

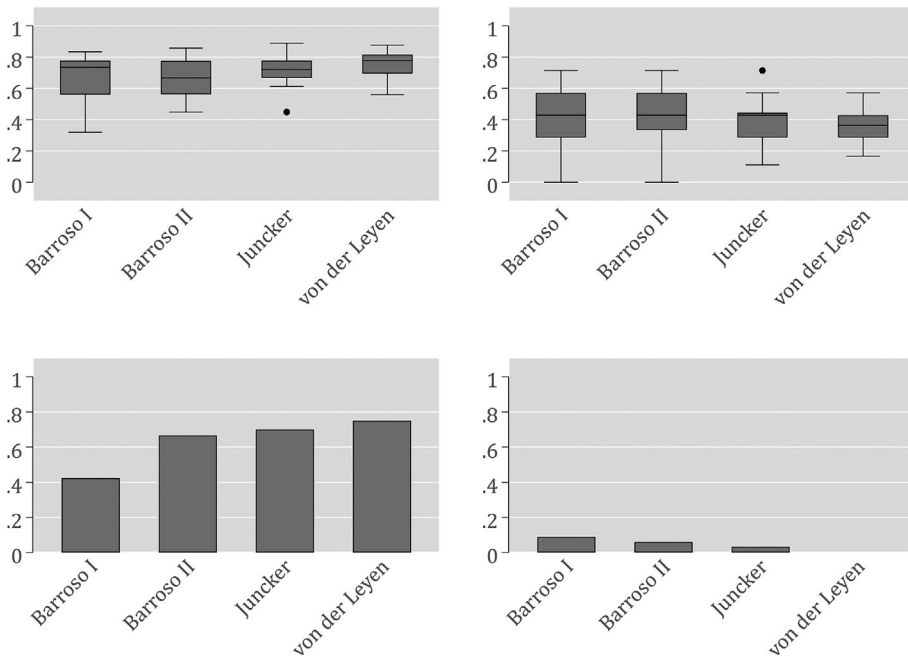
have also become more uniformly diverse over time, as the shrinking spread of the box plots displays.

On the other hand, however, we see a clear ‘re-nationalization’ when it comes to leadership composition. As the lower left panel shows, the share of *cabinets* in which the *chef de cabinet* shares the national origin of the responsible commissioner has been increasing over time and is now close to 80%. Deputy chefs generally hardly ever share the nationality of their commissioner (lower right panel), which further underscores that commissioners prioritise having a *chef de cabinet* from their own member state over having a deputy from their own member state, as chefs and deputies should not share nationality. Accordingly, rising national diversity in the overall cabinet membership has been somewhat compensated for by declining national diversity at the leadership level.

Diversity of Experience

Next, Figure 3 examines how cabinets have evolved regarding the political experience of their members. The left panel shows that diversity regarding prior political experiences has remained rather stable over time. When we look at the individual types of political experience in the right panel, the most apparent trend is the increasing share of cabinet members who have experience at the EU level. On average, roughly a third of the membership in Commission cabinets has some prior political experience at the national level,

Figure 2: National Diversity of COM Cabinets and Their Leadership.



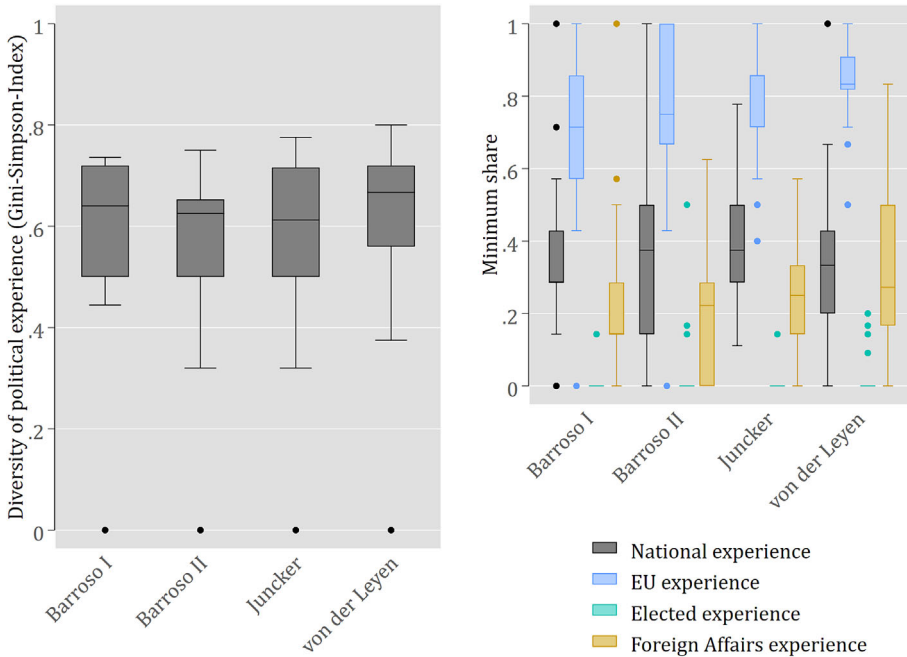
Notes: Upper left panel: national diversity (Gini-Simpson-Index); upper right panel: share of cabinet members from same member state as commissioner; lower left panel: share of cabinets with common national origin of commissioner and *chef de cabinet*; lower right panel: share of cabinets with common national origin of commissioner and deputy *chef de cabinet*.

and this share has been quite stable over time, even though there is also quite considerable variance across the cabinets of a Commission administration. Very few have an elected background, meaning that they are likely appointed for their subject expertise, rather than political skills, as would be expected.

Members with foreign affairs experience on average compose roughly a fifth of a cabinet and this share has increased slightly over time, from a median of 14% in 2004 to 27% in 2019. Note that those are minimum shares, which assume that members for whom we lack data do *not* have the type of political experience we are interested in. Given this constraint, the high and still growing share of cabinet members with EU experience is even more remarkable. Thus, whilst Commission cabinets have increasingly become populated by EU experts, they have maintained a relatively high and stable degree of diversity in the political experiences of their members. This is illustrated by the fact that the median probability that two randomly drawn cabinet members had different paths of political socialization has consistently been above 60% since 2004. We should not forget, however, that this figure assumes that missing cases have a random distribution in political experiences.

Finally, Figure 4 shows the diversity of cabinets regarding the professional expertise of their members and how individual professions have been represented over time. The data indicate that the cabinets' composition regarding professional backgrounds has

Figure 3: Diversity and Types of Political Experience Over Time. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



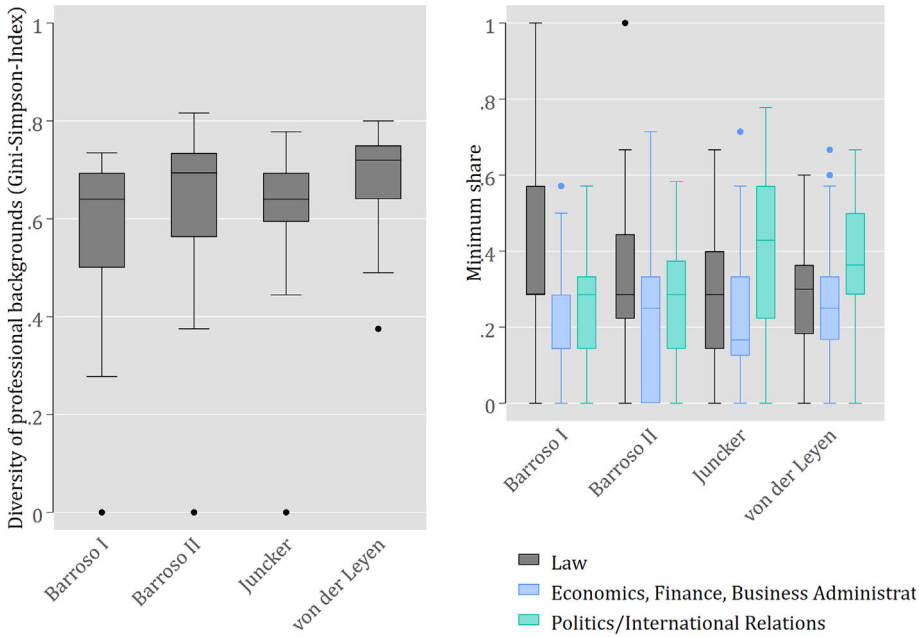
Notes: Left panel: overall diversity in political experience per cabinet, right panel: minimum share of cabinet members with a particular type of political experience.

become somewhat more diverse over time and Commission cabinets are generally more similar today than they were during the Barroso years, which is indicated by the shrinking range of the box plots. The shares of cabinet members with a law background have decreased to some extent at the expense of cabinet members with a background in political science or international relations. The share of cabinet members with a professional background in economics, finance or business administration has remained rather stable over time.

Summary of Descriptive Empirical Evidence

Overall, there is mixed evidence for the rising diversity of *cabinets* within the EC. On the one hand, the share of women serving in them has increased, and national diversity is higher today than in the 2000s; professional diversity has also increased slightly. On the other hand, commissioners increasingly prefer to have *chefs de cabinet* from their own member state and diversity regarding political backgrounds has remained rather stable over time, although there has been an increase in the share of cabinet members with political experience at the EU level. On a general level, the descriptive analysis reveals that *cabinets* of the Commission differ regarding their composition on various important dimensions.

Figure 4: Diversity and Types of Professional Backgrounds Over Time. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



III. Composition and Policy Outcomes

As noted by Strebler et al. (2019), transparency of process can bolster perceptions of throughput legitimacy in policy-making, which is an area where the EC has traditionally suffered (i.e., Schmidt, 2013). More transparent selection processes have seemingly led to more diverse *cabinets*. However, might this diversity also undercut the EC’s ability to direct the course of EU legislation? We explore this possibility by examining the association between *cabinet* diversity and (a) the complexity of the legislative proposals cleared by the cabinet and (b) the ability of the cabinet to anticipate inter-institutional legislative dynamics.

Diversity and Complexity

The complexity of Commission proposals varies significantly (Hurka et al., 2022), and existing research has shown that excessively complex policies can prolong decision-making (Hurka and Haag, 2020), undermine compliance (Kaplou, 1996), complicate implementation (Haag et al., 2024; Limberg et al., 2021) and make policy evaluation more difficult (Adam et al., 2018). For those reasons, the reduction of policy complexity is a major goal of the EC in the context of its Better Regulation agenda (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2022). Overly complex proposals have been shown to increase ‘anticipation loss’ (Rauh, 2021) by the EC, thus jeopardising its agenda-setting power vis-à-vis the Council and EP. To better understand the factors that fuel the complexity of EU legislation

can have important normative implications for the legitimacy and effectiveness of EU public policy. Specifically, whilst we know that political and institutional factors make a difference for the complexity of EU legislation (Hurka, 2023), we are interested in whether this complexity also has distinct administrative origins.

Although the various DGs are the internal starting points, our interviews with *cabinet* members were quick to point out the ability of their colleagues to overrule DG drafts. As one official put it, '[the] DG has their things in the pipeline which the commissioner can agree to or not and in addition ... the commissioner can say 'in addition to this I want to do this, this and this' – which might not be at all in the agenda of the DG ... but in the end it's the prerogative of the commissioner, she has the last word'.³ During the drafting of legislation, 'the whole text can change completely if it was politically decided to' at the *cabinet* level⁴ and 'Sometimes we even draft ourselves parts of it or completely ... [but] we also need to take into account what other commissioners may ... [or] the steer of the VP and the president's cabinet'.⁵

How might the diversity of the cabinets affect their role in policy formulation? On the one hand, one might expect that a more heterogeneous composition of cabinets amplifies political conflict and complicates the flow of information, thereby increasing the difficulty of finding common ground. Put differently, diversity might enhance the transaction costs that accrue during the policy formulation process. In this situation, increasing the complexity of the policy proposal might serve as a mechanism of conflict resolution, helping to integrate diverse views in a policy compromise. In that sense, we should expect the complexity of the policy proposals cabinets clear to be maximized when the national backgrounds, political paths of socialization and professional expertise of the responsible cabinet members vary widely.

On the other hand, if a cabinet features many members who share a certain national origin, type of political socialization or professional background, we should expect the transaction costs associated with the drafting of a policy proposal to be reduced due to a simplified flow of information amongst like-minded officials. If cabinets are staffed homogeneously with members having similar professional expertise, for example, this should lead to very similar perspectives on the policy problem that is being addressed. For instance, officials trained in business administration might interpret a given policy problem quite distinctively from the way lawyers look at the problem. If those different professional perspectives are not mixed in a cabinet, we should expect the cabinet to face relatively low costs of policy formulation. In this situation, potentially contradictory perspectives do not have to be considered and a groupthink mentality might lead to rather simple policy proposals. Our general expectation is therefore that additional (reduced) diversity may lead to more (less) complex proposals.

Capturing the Impact of Diversity on Complexity

To test this expectation, we use data from the EUPLEX project (Hurka et al., 2022) to match our data on *cabinet* composition with information on the policy proposals issued by the EC between 29 November 2004 and 3 January 2023, based on the commissioner

³Interview 1, European Commission, Brussels. 1 March 2023.

⁴Interview 1.

⁵Interview 2.

responsible for a given proposal. To make the hypothesis tests as conservative as possible, we restrict our empirical focus to a theoretically relevant subset of policy proposals. Specifically, we only focus on new policy proposals and leave out those that only amend existing legislation. We also exclude proposals that suffer from formatting issues in EUR-Lex (e.g., missing line breaks), which threaten the validity of our complexity measures (see below). Moreover, we focus on three main legislative procedures (co-decision/ordinary legislative procedure, consultation and assent/consent) and three types of legal instruments (directives, regulations and decisions). Accordingly, we leave out proposals for non-legislative enactments and recommendations. In total, the final dataset contains 915 policy proposals, nested in 95 different *cabinets*.

We use three different features of the policy texts to approximate their complexity. First, we use the number of words in a proposal as a relatively straightforward measure of *length*. We exclude annexes from this calculation, because annexes vary widely in form and shape and often contain tables or formulae, whose size is difficult to compare meaningfully across policy proposals. Second, we look at the proposal's word entropy (Shannon, 1948) as a measure for the proposal's linguistic and conceptual *breadth*. Word entropy is an established measure from information theory, which essentially reflects the variety of information contained in a text and is calculated as follows:

$$-\sum_{w \in W} p_w \log_2(p_w)$$

where p_w is the probability p of a token's occurrence in the given bag of tokens W . Finally, we measure the number of internal cross-references per article in the policy proposal as an indicator of *interdependence*. This gives us an idea of the extent to which individual legal provisions in a policy proposal interact with each other and, hence, the costs with interpreting and implementing the provisions. Previous research has shown that those cross-references crucially affect the perceived complexity of a policy text (Senninger, 2020).

To analyse how cabinet diversity and policy complexity are related, we use a generalized least squares model with random effects and robust standard errors clustered at the cabinet level. This allows us to correct for some heteroskedasticity issues and consider that proposals made by the same cabinet are not independent of each other. Due to space constraints, tables of all regression outputs can be found in Appendix S1.

Our models on the complexity of Commission proposals control for several important alternative explanations. Most importantly, this concerns the *policy area* of the proposal, which we determine based on the DG responsible for a particular proposal.⁶ It is also important to control for the point in *time* in which a certain proposal was made, as the complexity of Commission proposals has been increasing over the years. Also, the *legislative cycle* plays a role and should be expected to affect complexity in a curvilinear fashion. We should expect the most complex proposals to be adopted around the middle of the legislative cycle, when the Commission had enough time to prepare them and still has enough time to get them passed before the next election takes place. Moreover, we control for the *legislative procedure* in use for a given proposal (co-decision/ordinary legislative procedure, consultation or assent/consent) and the type of *legal instrument* (decision, directive

⁶Please consult Appendix S1 for information on how we coded policy areas.

or regulation). We also control for the number of *EUROVOC* classifiers attached to a policy proposal to capture co-ordination requirements and problem complexity. Finally, we account for whether the proposal is an *implementing act*.

Lawyers Make Things Complicated

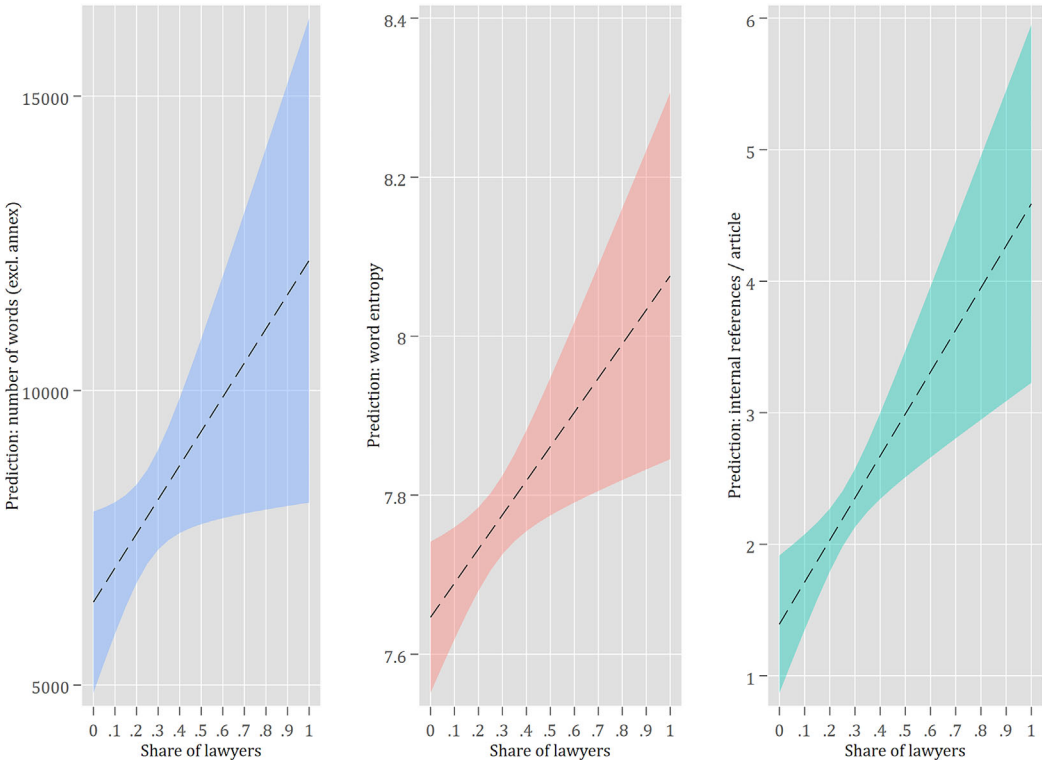
After controlling for those potential alternative explanations, the models provide no clear evidence that the diversity of Commission *cabinets* affects the complexity of the policy outputs those cabinets produce. If at all, we find only weak and unsystematic evidence for individual indicators. There is also no systematic evidence that would substantiate the hypothesis that the national diversity in general or a shared nationality of the commissioner and her *chef de cabinet* would make a difference for the complexity of the Commission's policy output. We also do not find any systematic relationships regarding the share of members with political or professional backgrounds, with one major exception: the (minimum) share of cabinet members with a background in law.

The share of lawyers in a cabinet is positively associated with longer proposals (model 1), more conceptually diverse proposals (model 2) and proposals in which individual legal provisions strongly interact with each other (model 3). Complete results are included in Appendix S1. Thus, the share of lawyers in a *cabinet* apparently makes quite a difference for the complexity of the policy output cabinets produce. The question we cannot answer completely in this research design is whether this is truly a causal relationship (i.e., lawyers are driving complexity) or whether people with law degrees self-select into *cabinets* that deal with the most complex policy areas. However, because our models control for policy areas and use random effects at the cabinet level, we argue that the models rather suggest that a higher share of lawyers indeed tends to lead to more complex policy proposals. In other words, even if we hold policy areas constant and cluster standard errors at the *cabinet* level, the significant association persists.

It is also important to note that there is no clear indication that an increase in the share of economists or political scientists affects policy complexity significantly in either direction; the effect appears exclusively for lawyers. Accordingly, whilst professional *diversity* as such does not have a clear impact on policy complexity, the precise professional *composition* of the cabinet does make a difference. Figure 5 plots the marginal effects for an increase in the share of lawyers in a cabinet and the (a) number of words, (b) the word entropy and (c) the number of internal cross-references per article in the cabinet's policy proposals. Substantively, an increase in the share of lawyers per cabinet by one standard deviation (SD) is associated with an increase of 1045 words in the Commission proposal (0.10 SDs), 0.08 more word entropy (0.12 SDs) and 0.58 more internal references per article (0.24 SDs). Accordingly, lawyers have the most substantive impact on the extent to which individual articles in a legislative proposal reference each other.

When we compare the complexity of Commission proposals across cabinets of different professional compositions, we can see that increases in complexity only materialize when the share of lawyers increases (see Figure 6). In contrast, complexity remains constant irrespective of the share of cabinet members with backgrounds in politics/IR and economics.

Figure 5: Marginal Effects: Share of Cabinet Members With Law Background on Complexity. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcms.13678)]

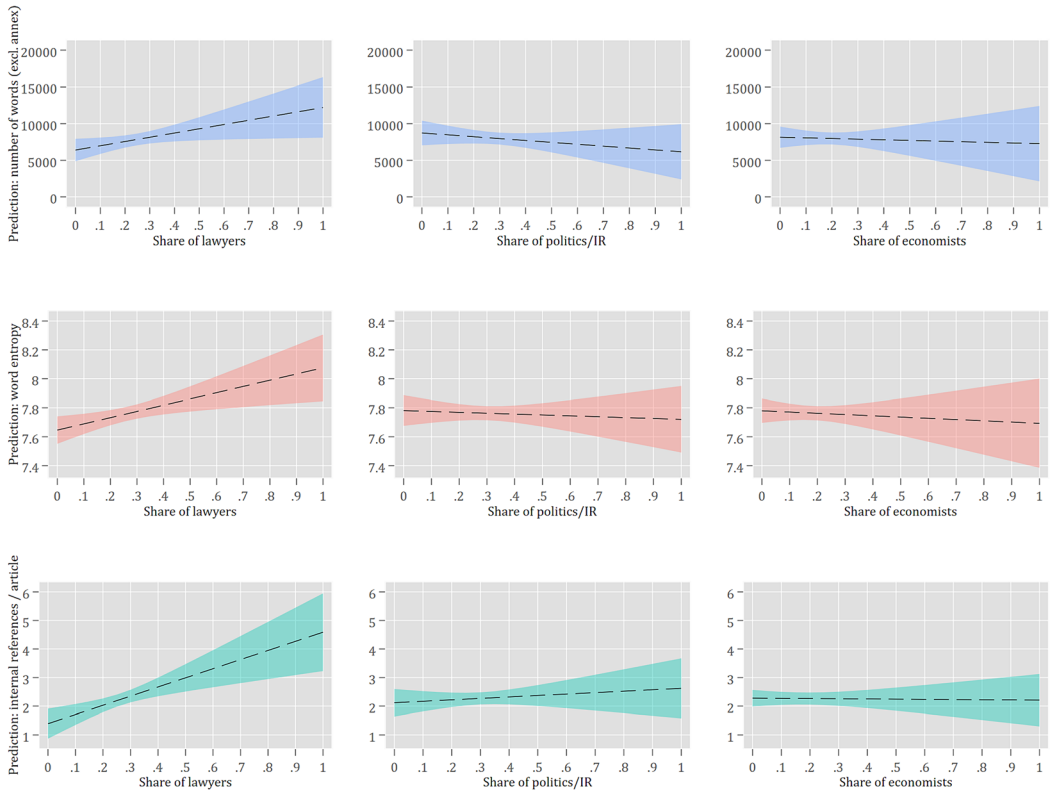


Diversity and Legislative Anticipation

Given the previous analysis, we can already conclude that *cabinet* diversity does not entail any clearly detrimental or beneficial consequences for the quality of the EC's legislative proposals, in terms of proposal complexity. The crucial follow-up question that results from this insight is whether *cabinet* diversity might potentially be an asset for the EC when trying to anticipate inter-institutional legislative dynamics.

As Rauh (2021) showed, the quality of the EC's legislative anticipation (i.e., its ability to formulate policy proposals that experience only little change during the legislative process) varies substantially across policy domains and hence, the organizational structure of the Commission. One potential factor that might drive this variance is the composition of the cabinet responsible for a given legislative proposal. Specifically, one might argue that given their inclusive composition, diverse *cabinets* better mirror the diversity of the European Union at large than less diverse cabinets. As a result, they should be better able to foresee potential political conflicts and dispose of an improved ability to acquire information over the legislative institutions' political preferences. By implication, we would expect legislative proposals cleared by diverse *cabinets* to be closer to the eventual outcome of the legislative process than proposals cleared by less diverse cabinets. In

Figure 6: Marginal Effects: Comparison Across Professional Backgrounds. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



empirical terms, we should hence see fewer differences between the initial policy proposal and the final legislative text when the diversity of the responsible Commission cabinet increases.

Identifying Complexity Change

To explore this conjecture, we rely on the complexity measures introduced in the previous section, but now focus on the differences between the complexity of the initial proposal and the final text. Specifically, we look at (1) the relative difference in the number of words between the texts in percent, (2) the absolute change in the word entropy score and (3) the absolute change in the share of internal cross-references per article. We use the same model specifications as in the previous analysis and our models on legislative anticipation contain the same control variables as our models on proposal complexity, with the only exception of the *legislative cycle* variable.

The analysis shows that again, *cabinet* diversity neither improves nor harms the Commission's ability of legislative anticipation. Across all three indicators, we do not find that policy proposals cleared by diverse cabinets experience significantly different fates during legislative negotiations, relative to those cleared by less diverse cabinets. Similarly, the evidence for an impact of the cabinets' precise composition (i.e., the experiences and

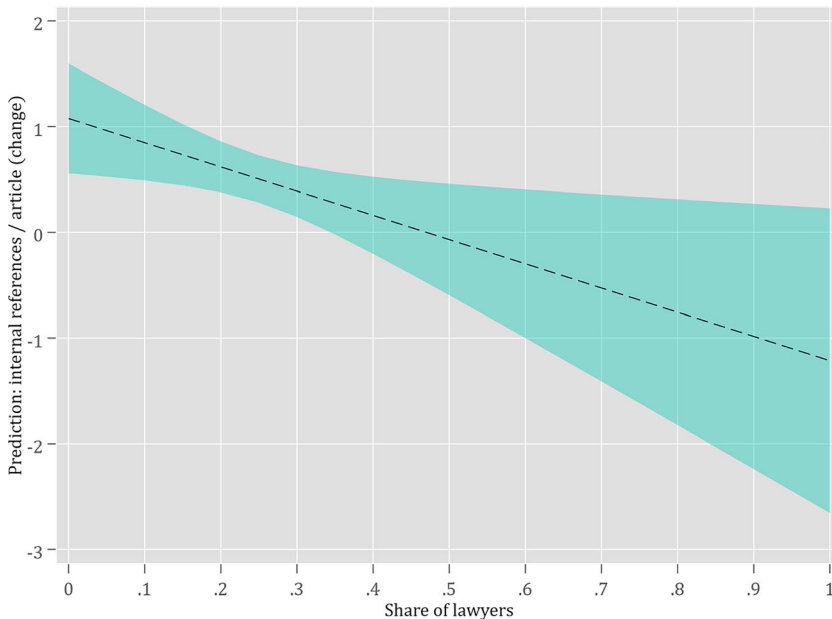
professional occupations of their members) is sketchy and unsystematic. Individual coefficients partially reach conventional levels of statistical significance, but overall, the relationships are not particularly robust. Again, however, we do find an interesting pattern for the share of lawyers in a cabinet.

Undoing the Lawyers' Work

As the previous analysis has shown, the share of lawyers is positively associated with different indicators of proposal complexity. Our analysis on legislative anticipation reveals, however, that the legislative institutions correct this excessive complexity during their negotiations, at least as far as cross-referencing is concerned. We have shown that proposals that were cleared by cabinets with a large share of lawyers display an inflated share of cross-references per article, but the legislative institutions reduce this share again during their negotiations. Also, the number of words and the proposals' word entropy scores tend to get reduced, but the associations do not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Accordingly, whilst our analysis suggests that the share of lawyers in a cabinet is associated with more complex initial legislative proposals, this excessive complexity gets partially corrected during the legislative negotiations. Figure 7 illustrates this finding and demonstrates that the higher the share of lawyers in the responsible *cabinet*, the stronger the reductions in the share of cross-references per article legislative proposals experience during legislative negotiations.

Based on those empirical results, we conclude that the diversity of Commissioner *cabinets* does not have any detrimental consequences for the complexity of the Commission's

Figure 7: Marginal Effects: Share of Cabinet Members With Law Background on Change Between Commission Proposal and Final Text (Internal References/Article). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



legislative proposals or the dynamics of subsequent inter-institutional negotiations. At the same time, diversity also does not lead to less complex proposals or proposals that better reflect the positions of the legislative institutions. In our view, those non-findings constitute good news for the Commission. Whilst increasing the diversity of its staff certainly has a positive impact on the input legitimacy of the EU's legislative process, it does not adversely affect the quality of EU legislation or the Commission's legislative anticipation. Substantively, the model suggests that an increase of the share of lawyers by one SD is associated with a decrease of 0.41 cross-references per article during legislative negotiations (0.18 SDs).

Conclusion

The *cabinets* of the European commissioners perform crucial, policy-relevant functions in the political system of the EU. Despite their prominent role, the composition and policy impact of Commission *cabinets* have hardly been scrutinized systematically so far. In this study, we aimed to develop a better understanding for how Commission *cabinets* are composed, how their composition has changed over time and whether their composition makes a difference for EU public policy. Combining data sources on the backgrounds of *cabinet* members from four Commission administrations with data on the properties of corresponding policy proposals adopted by the Commission's *cabinets*, we investigated how the diversity of Commission *cabinets* has evolved over time affected the complexity of the Commission's policy outputs, alongside its ability of legislative anticipation.

Our analysis revealed that the *cabinets* of the EC have indeed become more diverse regarding their gender composition and the variety of nationalities represented within them. However, especially, this latter trend was qualified by the fact that Commissioners have increasingly opted to give the important role of *chef de cabinet* to a civil servant from their own member state. We also found that *cabinet* members increasingly dispose of political experience at the EU level and that *cabinets* are often composed of a mixture of members with different professional backgrounds and socialisations. This itself is a substantial set of findings, given the dearth of available data on civil servant backgrounds in the EU.

On the other hand, the shifting composition of the *cabinets* appears to have made little difference for internal policy-making. We do provide evidence that the share of *cabinet* members with law degrees is related to the complexity of the legislative proposals that are cleared by them, as well as the extent to which those proposals are changed later by the legislative institutions of the EU. Otherwise, whilst professional diversity does not clearly affect the quality of the Commission's legislative proposals, as such, nor its ability of legislative anticipation, the precise professional composition of its cabinets can make some difference. This finding fits previous research that found few effects of demographic characteristics on the decision behaviour of civil servants, with the major exception of educational backgrounds (Egeberg and Trondal, 2020, p. 8).

Moving forward, we urge future scholarship to take the internal composition of the Commission – and indeed other civil service positions – more seriously. Understanding shifts in personnel composition can help us to better understand shifts at the institutional level. Validating (or, in our case, mostly rejecting) concerns that civil service composition

matters for institutional outputs is important to cross-check normative concerns with empirical realities. Whereas we have only been able to document the institutional evolution of one bureaucratic entity via its personnel and question the effect of this changing composition for policy outcomes, we expect that our approach can be relevant for the study of other administrative contexts, both in and outside of the EU.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Ana Cojan and Louis Scott for their help in data collection for this article. We are grateful for the constructive suggestions made by Amie Kreppel at the 2023 European Union Studies Association conference in Pittsburgh and Bernard Steunenberg at the 2022 ECPR Standing Group on the European Union conference in Rome. We also appreciate the supportive recommendations made to us by Morten Egeberg and Tobias Bach. Research travel and assistance for this article was supported by internal funding from the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Nottingham. Steffen Hurka gratefully acknowledges funding by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) – 407514878 (EUPLEX – Coping with Policy Complexity in the European Union).

Data Availability Statement

Replication data are available online through the JCMS website.

Correspondence:

William T. Daniel, School of Politics and International Relations, Law and Social Sciences, University of Nottingham, Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK.
email: william.daniel@nottingham.ac.uk

References

- Abélès, M. and Bellier, I. (1996) 'La Commission européenne: du compromis culturel à la culture politique du compromis'. *Revue française de science politique*, Vol. 46, No. 3, pp. 431–456. <https://doi.org/10.3406/rfsp.1996.395065>.
- Adam, C., Steinebach, Y. and Knill, C. (2018) 'Neglected Challenges to Evidence-Based Policy-Making: The Problem of Policy Accumulation'. *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 51, No. 3, pp. 269–290. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-018-9318-4>.
- Ban, C. (2013) *Management and Culture in an Enlarged European Commission: From Diversity to Unity?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Studies in European Union Politics, Palgrave MacmillanS).
- Bauer, M.W., Kassim, H. and Connolly, S. (2021) 'The Quiet Transformation of the EU Commission Cabinet System'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 0, No. 0, pp. 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.2003423>.
- Blom-Hansen, J. and Senninger, R. (2021) 'The Commission in EU Policy Preparation'. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 3, pp. 625–642. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13123>.
- Christiansen, T. (1997) 'Tensions of European Governance: Politicized Bureaucracy and Multiple Accountability in the European Commission'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 73–90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/135017697344244>.
- Coombes, D.L. (1970) *Politics and Bureaucracy in the European Community: A Portrait of the Commission of the E.E.C* (London: Allen & Unwin).
- Deckarm, R. (2016) 'From National Enclaves to Supporting Offices: An Analysis of the 1999 Reform of European Commissioners' Cabinets'. *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, Vol. 12, No. 3. <https://www.jcer.net/index.php/jcer/article/view/724> Accessed 24th June 2021.

- Deckarm, R. (2017) 'The Countries They Know Best: How National Principals Influence European Commissioners and Their Cabinets'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 24, No. 3, pp. 447–466. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2016.1153134>.
- Dunlop, C.A. and Radaelli, C.M. (2022) 'Better Regulation in the European Union'. In *Handbook of Regulatory Authorities* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing), pp. 303–313. <https://www.elgaronline.com/display/book/9781839108990/book-part-9781839108990-31.xml> Accessed 31st May 2023.
- Egeberg, M. and Heskestad, A. (2010) 'The Denationalization of Cabinets in the European Commission'. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 4, pp. 775–786. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2010.02073.x>.
- Egeberg, Morten, and Jarle Trondal. 2020. 'The Organizational Basis for Public Governance'. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1491>.
- European Commission (2021) *College (2019–2024) The Commissioners* (Brussels: European Commission). https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024_en Accessed 1st July 2021.
- Gouglas, A., Brans, M. and Jaspers, S. (2017) 'European Commissioner Cabinet Advisers: Policy Managers, Bodyguards, Stakeholder Mobilizers'. *Public Administration*, Vol. 95, No. 2, pp. 359–377. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12301>.
- Haag, M., Hurka, S. and Kaplaner, C. (2024) 'Policy Complexity and Implementation Performance in the European Union'. *Regulation & Governance*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rego.12580>.
- Hartlapp, M., Metz, J. and Rauh, C. (2013) 'Linking Agenda Setting to Coordination Structures: Bureaucratic Politics Inside the European Commission'. *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 35, No. 4, pp. 425–441. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2012.703663>.
- Hurka, S. (2023) 'The Institutional and Political Roots of Complex Policies: Evidence From the European Union'. *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 62, No. 4, pp. 1168–1190. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12555>.
- Hurka, S. and Haag, M. (2020) 'Policy Complexity and Legislative Duration in the European Union'. *European Union Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 87–108. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116519859431>.
- Hurka, S., Haag, M. and Kaplaner, C. (2022) 'Policy Complexity in the European Union, 1993–Today: Introducing the EUPLEX Dataset'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 29, No. 9, pp. 1512–1527. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1938174>.
- Kaplow, L. (1996) 'How Tax Complexity and Enforcement Affect the Equity and Efficiency of the Income Tax'. *National Tax Journal*, Vol. 49, No. 1, pp. 135–150. <https://doi.org/10.1086/NTJ41789191>.
- Kassim, H., Peterson, J., Bauer, M.W., Connolly, S., Dehousse, R., Hooghe, L. and Thompson, A. (2013) *The European Commission of the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Kreppel, A. and Oztas, B. (2017) 'Leading the Band or Just Playing the Tune? Reassessing the Agenda-Setting Powers of the European Commission'. *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 8, pp. 1118–1150. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414016666839>.
- Limberg, J., Steinebach, Y., Bayerlein, L. and Knill, C. (2021) 'The More the Better? Rule Growth and Policy Impact From a Macro Perspective'. *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 60, No. 2, pp. 438–454. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12406>.
- Michelmann, H.J. (1978) 'Multinational Staffing and Organizational Functioning in the Commission of the European Communities'. *International Organization*, Vol. 32, No. 2, pp. 477–496.
- Page, E. (1997) *People Who Run Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Peters, B.G. (2018) *The Politics of Bureaucracy: An Introduction to Comparative Public Administration* (7th edition) (New York: Routledge) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315813653>.

- Peterson, J. (2017) 'Juncker's Political European Commission and an EU in Crisis'. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 2, pp. 349–367. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12435>.
- Publications Office of the European Union. (2021) 'Official Directory of the European Union – EU Whoiswho – Publications Office of the EU'. *EU Whoiswho*. <https://op.europa.eu/en/web/who-is-who> Accessed 1st July 2021.
- Rauh, C. (2021) 'One Agenda-Setter or Many? The Varying Success of Policy Initiatives by Individual Directorates-General of the European Commission 1994–2016'. *European Union Politics*, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 3–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116520961467>.
- Ross, G. (1994) 'Inside the Delors Cabinet European Agenda'. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 4, pp. 499–524.
- Schmidt, V.A. (2013) 'Democracy and Legitimacy in the European Union Revisited: Input, Output and "Throughput"'. *Political Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 1, pp. 2–22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2012.00962.x>.
- Senninger, R. (2020) 'What Makes Policy Complex?' <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/qa5ug> Accessed 27th April 2023.
- Shannon, C.E. (1948). 'A Mathematical Theory of Communication'. *Bell System Technical Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 379–423. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1538-7305.1948.tb01338.x>
- Shore, C. (2009) *Building Europe: The Cultural Politics of European Integration* (Routledge).
- Stevens, A. and Stevens, H. (2001) *Brussels Bureaucrats?: The Administration of the European Union* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Strebel, M.A., Kübler, D. and Marcinkowski, F. (2019) 'The Importance of Input and Output Legitimacy in Democratic Governance: Evidence From a Population-Based Survey Experiment in Four West European Countries'. *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 58, No. 2, pp. 488–513. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12293>.
- von der Leyen, U. (2019) 'Communication From the President of the Commission: Rules Governing the Composition of the Cabinets of the Members of the Commission and of the Spokesperson's Service'. <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/rules-composition-cabinets.pdf> Accessed 2nd July 2021.
- Wille, A. (2013) *The Normalization of the European Commission: Politics and Bureaucracy in the EU Executive* (OUP Oxford).

Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Appendix S1. Supporting Information. Replication material.