

Political attention in the Council of the European Union: A new dataset of working party meetings, 1995–2014

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Abstract

Little firm knowledge exists about the allocation of the Council's political attention across policy areas and over time. This article presents a new dataset of the date, duration, and policy coding of more than 70,000 meetings of Council working parties, covering all areas of the Council's policy activities between 1995 and 2014. In terms of both scope and resolution, the data allow for the generation of unprecedented insights into what issues occupy the Council's agenda, how that varies between and within policy areas, and how that changes over time. After discussing conceptual issues and explaining the construction of the dataset, the article demonstrates its usefulness and versatility through analyses of the Council's political attention at various levels of aggregation.

Keywords

Agenda-setting, Council of the European Union, policy agenda, political attention, working parties

Studying the Council's political attention

What policy issues attract the attention of political actors? Under what conditions and why do they come into the limelight? These are central questions in the study of agenda-setting and policy-making more generally (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005; Kingdon, 1995). Receiving attention by the relevant political decision-makers is a pre-condition for policy problems to be acted upon, and the ability to prevent an issue to be put on the agenda of a political body is itself an important

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source of power (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962). Thus, studying how political attention is distributed across policy issues and time tells us a lot about which actors influence the agenda and under what conditions they are able to do so. In addition, the positive study of agenda-setting power also has significant normative implications. The way political attention is allocated to different policy issues is quite indicative of the ability of a political system to address societal concerns in a proportional and unbiased manner. In this respect, the way political attention is distributed informs evaluations of both how well a political system works in processing public demands in a timely and effective manner (i.e. its output legitimacy) and the degree to which it provides equal conditions of access for those demands to the political agenda (i.e. its input legitimacy).

Given the importance of agenda-setting in the determination of policy outcomes and its implications for the normative evaluation of political systems, recent years have seen a cottage industry of research developing and analysing large-scale datasets measuring the allocation of attention to different issues in various ways and across many different countries (e.g. Baumgartner et al., 2009, 2011; Green-Pedersen and Walgrave, 2014; Jennings et al., 2011; Mortensen et al., 2011). In the context of the European Union (EU), few studies have so far applied this approach, and none of them has investigated the political agenda of the Council of the EU (on the European Council, see Alexandrova, 2015; Alexandrova et al., 2014; Alexandrova and Timmermans, 2013; on the Commission and European Parliament, see Princen, 2012). As Princen (2012: 4–6) points out, studying the allocation of political attention in the EU does not only inform us about the functioning of the political system and how that compares to normative ideals, but also about the extent and process of European integration in different policy areas.

The dataset presented in this article complements existing efforts in mapping the political agenda of different EU institutions. The dataset is based on the dates and duration of Council working party meetings to measure the allocation of the Council's political attention to different policy issues between 1 January 1995 and 31 December 2014. In terms of the time-frame and policy areas covered, the data allow for the generation of unprecedented insights into the activities of this traditionally rather opaque institution. The dataset covers almost the entire time period since the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty on 1 November 1993 that formally transformed the then 'European Economic Community', mainly concerned with the establishment of a common market, into a more political 'European Union'. As such, it enables the analysis of long-term trends in European policy-making and integration since the mid-1990s.

The data also cover the entire range of policy issues that the Council deals with, including activities that are addressed through very disparate policy processes and instruments. Given the exhaustive coverage and consistent measurement of political attention, the data make it possible to conduct systematic comparative studies of how the Council's relative attention is allocated across intergovernmentalist and more 'communitarized' policy areas. Finally, another advantage of the data is its high temporal resolution. Working party meetings are recorded on a daily basis,

leading to a near-continuous tracking of political attention over time. Whenever research is geared towards the identification of causal effects, being able to establish the precise temporal sequence of events will yield more credible inferences.

To summarise, the dataset introduced in this article provides new opportunities to study the distribution of political attention in the Council over time, across and within policy areas, at a scale and depth that has not been possible so far. The next section discusses some conceptual issues raised by measuring attention through the duration of working party meetings. This section is followed by a description of the creation of the dataset. The remainder of the article illustrates possible uses of the dataset through example applications at different levels of aggregation.

Measuring Council attention by the duration of working party meetings

The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘attention’ as the ‘notice taken of someone or something; the regarding of someone or something as interesting or important’.¹ Political attention can then be defined as the attention devoted to particular policy issues by political decision-makers. When we talk about the attention of an entire political institution, the term refers to the collective notice taken of particular policy problems by members of that institution. In practice, members of an institution take ‘collective notice’ of particular policy issues by taking part in meetings in which those issues are being discussed, decisions are being made to address them, or both. For a political institution, paying attention to a policy issue usually implies devoting at least some meeting time to dealing with the issue. For quantifying absolute and relative amounts of attention, it seems natural to extend this kind of reasoning and measure the amount of attention by the amount of meeting time policy-makers spent debating and deciding on an issue. Thus, at a purely conceptual level, the amount of meeting time corresponds quite closely to the underlying concept, the amount of political attention. Whether or not the correspondence between meeting time and attention is quite so close in practice depends on how exactly meeting time is recorded and classified into policy categories in the context of a particular political institution.

The data presented in this article are based on the dates and duration of working party meetings held in the Council of the European Union between 1 January 1995 and 31 December 2014. Although meetings of ministers and the Committee of Permanent Representatives (Coreper) are included in the data set as well, they are not suitable for measuring attention to different policy issues: the number and duration of ministerial meetings is highly institutionalised and therefore varies hardly over time; and Coreper meetings cover all types of issues discussed in the Council, which makes a differentiation by policy area impossible.

The first question raised by this approach is whether or not the time spent by working parties on the discussion of different issues is a suitable indicator of the allocation of attention in ‘the Council’ as a whole. Working parties consist of member state representatives at the level of officials. National delegates are experts

in the policy area dealt with by the working party. Formally, working parties only 'prepare' the ministers' work, but de facto, they make the majority of Council decisions (Häge, 2007; see also Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace, 2006: 53; Van Schendelen, 1996). When an agreement has been reached at the working party level or the intermediate level of Coreper, ministers usually just approve the agreement without debate. Even if the ministers' involvement is required to resolve the last outstanding issues in a policy document, most controversies will have been settled already by working party members (Häge, 2013). Hence, the overwhelming part of the Council's policy-making activities takes place at working party level.

Indeed, Westlake and Galloway (2004: 200) refer to working parties as 'the Council's lifeblood', and Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace (2006: 96) state that 'working parties form the backbone of European integration, as it is within these groups that the basis for subsequent ministerial agreement is defined and, if necessary, refined'. In contrast to the agendas of ministerial meetings, which focus on a selective subset, all issues are discussed at the working party level. In fact, a focus on ministerial agendas might be problematic if the selection of issues for discussion by ministers is partly a result of strategic considerations, as suggested by Smeets (2013, 2015).

The rotating Presidency is in charge of convening meetings at all Council levels and has considerable control over their agendas (Häge, 2016; Tallberg, 2003, 2004; Warntjen, 2013a, 2013b). Programming of meetings starts years before a country assumes the Chair of the Council.² It is based on the anticipation of policy issues to be dealt with during the term, either as a result of external demands or the Presidency's own priorities. The number and dates of ministerial meetings are usually fixed at the beginning of the Presidency period, but the timetable of working party meetings is continuously updated to reflect changing meeting time requirements. Day-to-day scheduling is in the hands of a single official in the Presidency country's Permanent Representation, who adjudicates between competing bids by working party chairs for scarce meeting space and interpreting resources.

In principle, the possibility that sometimes meetings are scheduled when nothing of substance needs to be discussed or that meetings are about topics that are outside of the working party's remit cannot be ruled out. However, the scarcity of meeting resources (see also Tallberg, 2003: 10), together with the fact that, for most working party meetings, delegates have to travel from national capitals specifically to attend a particular meeting, makes the calling of 'unnecessary' meetings unlikely. Similarly, given that government representatives are generally specialists in the area dealt with by 'their' working party, discussions about issues outside the working party's remit are not expected to be common.

In contrast to many other datasets that have been developed to measure the agenda of political institutions, this dataset is not based on the coding of the content of policy documents (e.g. bills, laws, or political statements), but the coding of the titles of different decision-making bodies. One objection to such an approach is that the coding of policy content should be independent of the institutional

structure in which policy is dealt with. The idea here is that different institutional venues have particular biases for how to deal with particular policy problems and are therefore more or less receptive to different types of policies. As a result, which policies make it on the agenda of which institutional venue becomes an interesting question in itself. Another criticism relates to the stability of institutional arrangements, which track changes in political attention at best imperfectly and often with a considerable delay.

In the context of working parties, neither objection is a major concern. In contrast to policy-making bodies in other legislative institutions, which often have broader jurisdictions (e.g. parliamentary standing committees), the remit of most working parties is quite narrowly defined. Working parties are also quite easily established or abolished by a simple majority decision of Coreper if that is deemed necessary in light of new developments.³ Thus, the degree of ‘stickiness’ of working party structures is rather low; and even if obsolete bodies are not immediately dissolved, the lack of political attention in the policy area they are dealing with will show up in the data as a reduction in the meeting time of that working party.

Because working parties are usually quite specialised and deal with proposals that are very similar in terms of content, both within a meeting and across different meetings over time, coding for example working party agendas instead of the titles of working parties would in most instances not yield different policy categorisations.⁴ This claim is especially true for the top-level category distribution of attention across a limited number of broad policy areas or ‘major topics’, which forms the basis for most existing studies of policy agendas (e.g. Baumgartner et al., 2009; John and Jennings, 2010; Mortensen et al., 2011). In most policy areas, the specialisation and organisational differentiations of working parties are also large enough to enable studies of attention to policy sub-topics, as demonstrated by some of the applications below. However, exceptions to this rule exist. A stark example is the area of Environment, where two working parties deal with all internal and external environmental issues, respectively. The broad responsibilities of those two working parties do not permit the differentiation of attention to more narrowly defined sub-topics. In general, the depth of the policy category scheme in a particular policy area depends on the organisational structure of the Council in that sector. While this dependence might limit the range of research questions that can be pursued with the data, it does not invalidate the overall measurement approach.

Finally, one might argue that the amount of time spent on discussing a particular issue is generally not a good indicator for the political attention it receives, because the duration of discussions depends on a number of variables, like preference conflict, decision-making rules, or the substantive importance of the file under consideration. Here, a distinction needs to be made between the valid measurement of a concept and the role of other variables in possibly explaining variation in that measured concept. The definition of political attention advanced above stresses the ‘collective notice taken of particular policy problems’ by members of a political institution. The amount of time spent on deliberations seems as

least as good an indicator of this ‘collective notice taken’ by the Council than possible alternatives based on counting the number of times an issue formed an agenda item; not to speak of other measures that are based on the counting of outputs of policy-making processes (e.g. statements in Council conclusions, number of Commission proposals, number of adopted laws, etc.) rather than process characteristics. The possibility that the overall and relative amount of time spent on different policy issues is affected by political conflict, the voting threshold, the salience of a file, or indeed the working practices and organisational structures in different Council formations, is not a problem for the valid measurement of ‘political attention’. It just points to variables that researchers might want to consider as explanatory variables when using this or similar measures of ‘political attention’ as outcome variables in their analyses.

The identification of major topics relies on the Council’s own categorisation scheme, which is linked to the Council’s organisational differentiation into policy sector formations. The starting point for the development of the categorisation scheme is the 19 Council formations that existed until 2002. After that point in time, the Seville European Council reduced the number of formations to nine as part of a general effort to streamline the functioning of the Council in preparation for enlargement. However, most of the pre-2002 formations refer to clearly distinct policy areas. Only the dividing lines between ‘Information Society’ and ‘Telecommunications’ as well as ‘Industry’ and ‘Internal Market’ are more blurred. Thus, with the exception of those areas, which are merged, the study retains the original policy categorisation of the Council, resulting in 17 major topics. In the coding process, working parties established after 2002 could be allocated to one of the 17 major topics with negligible ambiguity, confirming that these topics form a distinctive, well-defined, and exhaustive set of categories. Table 1 provides the labels for the 17 major topics as well as an overview of the absolute and relative number of working parties and meetings associated with each topic in the dataset. Note that the table distinguishes between working parties and their sub-groups. The latter can be established by the Presidency ‘on the basis of practical need’.⁵ In the remainder of the article, the term ‘working parties’ is used to refer to both main and sub-groups.

Data collection and coding

Information about meetings of working parties was received from the Council Secretariat in response to formal requests for access to documents. The spreadsheets supplied by the Council Secretariat are based on the Council’s calendar of meetings and record the ‘session date’, the ‘slot’ (a.m., p.m., e.v., or a combination thereof), and a ‘meeting description’ in French.

In total, the raw data contain 78,959 entries. In a first step, observations that obviously did not include any meeting information were dropped (reducing the number of observations to 78,792) and the text of meeting descriptions was standardised as much as possible (e.g. by replacing different forms of common

Table 1. Working parties and meetings by policy area.

Major policy topics	Main groups (%)	Sub-groups (%)	Main and sub-groups	%	Number of meetings	%
General Affairs	33 (76.7)	10 (23.3)	43	9.8	8,141	11.3
Foreign Affairs	52 (78.8)	14 (21.2)	66	15.1	25,417	35.2
Development	6 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	6	1.4	1,267	1.8
Budget	3 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	3	0.7	1,318	1.8
Economic & Financial Affairs	20 (44.4)	25 (55.6)	45	10.3	3,158	4.4
Justice & Home Affairs	41 (89.1)	5 (10.9)	46	10.5	8,862	12.3
Agriculture	42 (37.2)	71 (62.8)	113	25.9	4,786	6.6
Fisheries	4 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	4	0.9	1,539	2.1
Internal Market & Industry	23 (31.9)	49 (68.1)	72	16.5	5,022	7.0
Telecommunications	5 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	5	1.1	870	1.2
Energy	4 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	4	0.9	817	1.1
Research	4 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	4	0.9	1,195	1.7
Employment & Social Policy	2 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	2	0.5	1,340	1.9
Transport	5 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	5	1.1	2,810	3.9
Environment	7 (63.6)	4 (36.4)	11	2.5	3,367	4.7
Health & Consumer Protection	2 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	2	0.5	1,057	1.5
Education, Youth & Culture	5 (83.3)	1 (16.7)	6	1.4	1,311	1.8
Total	258 (59.0)	179 (41.0)	437	100.0	72,277	100.0

Note: The number of working parties and sub-groups count the number of distinct groups in existence at any point during the study period (1995–2014).

abbreviations by their unabbreviated terms, standardising the use of blanks before and after punctuation marks, or removing pre- and suffixes that provided room location information).

In a second step, the meeting descriptions were linked to unique working party titles. For two reasons, the coding of working party titles was not straightforward. First, the spreadsheets supplied by the Council Secretariat do not only include meetings of official working parties, but information about any type of meeting that took place on the Council's premises, ranging from conciliation committee or trilogue meetings, CFSP troika meetings with third countries, various international conferences, staff seminars and workshops, military mission preparation meetings, the Constitutional Convention, to meetings of the Joint Supervision Authority for Schengen or the European Union Satellite Centre. Without further information, it is often not clear whether a meeting description refers to a working party or a different type of meeting. Second, working parties sometimes have similar titles, making it difficult to unambiguously link meeting descriptions to them. This problem is often caused by similarly named working parties that existed at different points in time.

To identify the population of working parties and disambiguate meetings of similarly named working parties at different points in time, the study relied on information from the Council's lists of preparatory bodies. The first official list of Council preparatory bodies has been published in November 1999.⁶ The list has been updated in roughly half-year intervals since. Based on the information in the lists, a separate dataset of 'lifecycle' information about working parties was developed. This dataset records the titles of all working parties mentioned in the list or any of its updates, together with the approximate dates of their establishment and abolishment. Unfortunately, the dates are only approximate because in most instances the 'birth' or 'death' date of a working party is not explicitly mentioned but has to be inferred from the working party's appearance on or disappearance from the list. Still, the resulting dataset provides information about the population of working parties during much of the study period and sufficiently narrows down the range of the time period in which a working party could have been in existence to allow for useful consistency checks.

Based on the information from the Council's list of preparatory bodies, the coding of meetings after November 1999 was greatly simplified. In general, all coding decisions for individual meeting descriptions were made manually, but implemented in the form of computer code in Stata. Thus, all coding is fully reproducible and the original meeting description is retained in the final dataset to enable plausibility checks and post-hoc corrections of errors. Note that, in most instances, several slightly different versions of meeting descriptions had to be linked to one of the 437 working parties. Together with the case-by-case identification of non-working party meetings, the coding required thousands of manual decisions. Most of the working parties in existence in November 1999 were also in operation during the preceding time-period. Thus, their coding could be extrapolated backwards in time. The coding of meeting descriptions that could not be linked to a working party mentioned in the 1999 list of preparatory bodies was based on additional information searches on the Internet and the Council's register of documents.⁷ Given the additional ambiguities about what working party those meetings refer to, they were only linked to a general policy category within a major topic. With additional knowledge about the working party structures within a particular policy area in the pre-1999 period, these meetings are easily recoded. However, in its current form, the data only allow reliable disaggregated analyses of sub-topics within a major topic after 1999.

In total, the coding of meeting descriptions identified 71,241 out of 78,792 (90%) entries in the raw data as containing information about working party meetings. The removal of duplicates (−355 observations), the creation of separate new entries (+1733 observations) for each working party taking part in a joint meeting, the merging of separate meeting entries of the same working party on the same day (−327 observations), and further corrections made as a result of consistency checks of the working party meeting with the working party lifecycle dataset (−15 observations), resulted in a final sample size of 72,277 meeting observations recording the duration of meetings in terms of half-day periods.

The analyses below use both relative and absolute frequencies of the duration data aggregated by year and policy area or sub-area. When the emphasis is on comparing changes in the *distribution* of attention to different policy areas over-time, relative frequencies are useful as they account for changes in the overall amount of available meeting time and space. When the emphasis is on over-time changes in the attention devoted to a *single* sub-area or issue, the direct tracking of temporal attention changes by absolute frequencies, without interference by simultaneous changes in a denominator, arguably outweighs the benefits of standardisation. In any way, analysis results using the alternative measurement approach lead to qualitatively similar results and are reported in the online appendix.

Attention across policy areas and over time

The general distribution of attention across the 17 policy areas is depicted in Figure 1. The figure is based on the share of meeting time of a particular policy area, aggregated by years. Although applying a different categorisation scheme, the figure demonstrates a couple of similarities with the distribution of attention in the European Council described by Alexandrova et al. (2014: 161). Figure 2 reproduces the corresponding figure in their article but restricts the time frame to cover the years 1995 to 2014 and relies on yearly rather than half-yearly time intervals to ease the comparison.

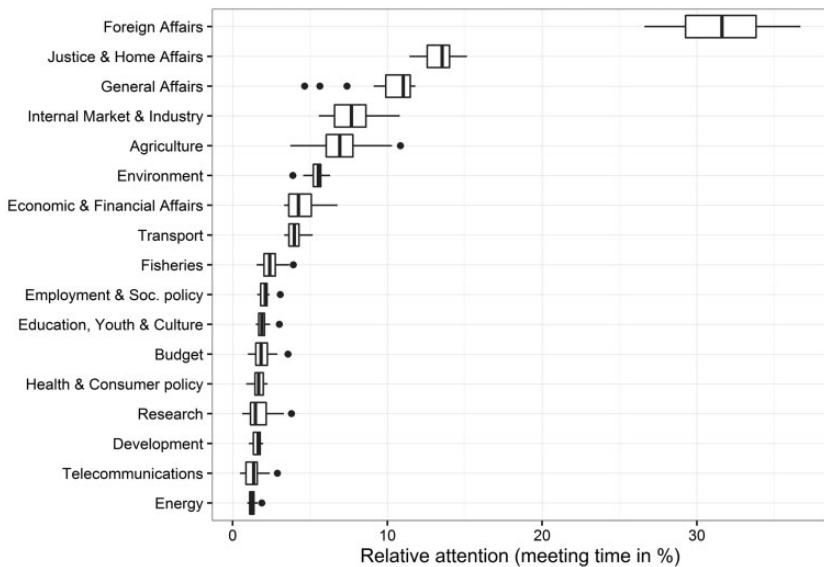


Figure 1. Distribution of attention in the Council of the EU across policy areas, 1995–2014.

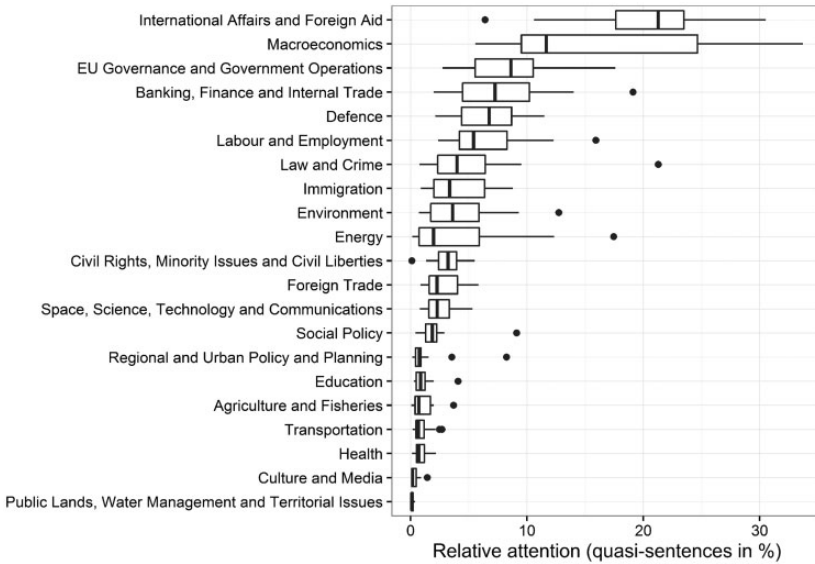


Figure 2. Distribution of attention in the European Council across policy areas, 1995–2014. Source: Alexandrova et al. (2014).

First, the distribution of attention to different policy areas is highly skewed. Second, Foreign Affairs, General Affairs, and Internal Market & Industry are amongst the policy areas receiving the largest shares of attention. The share for Justice & Home Affairs is somewhat more difficult to compare as the scheme proposed by Alexandrova et al. (2014) differentiates ‘Law & Crime’, ‘Civil rights & Liberties’, and ‘Immigration’ as separate major topic categories; but taken together, these areas account for a similarly large share of the attention in the European Council as Justice & Home Affairs in the Council of the EU. Given that working parties, through their work for the General Affairs Council, also act as preparatory bodies for the European Council, this resemblance of the distributions provides some support for both measures’ construct validity.

At the same time, the remaining differences between the Council of the EU and the European Council in the attention devoted to specific policy areas are quite easily explained by reference to the prevailing mode of policy-making. The latter is in turn at least partly a result of functional differences between the two institutions. The European Council is a purely executive body, whereas the Council of Ministers fulfils both executive and legislative functions. Highly integrated areas, like Agriculture and Environment, in which policies are adopted in the form of legally binding legislation through the Community method, seem to receive relatively more attention in the Council of Ministers than in the European Council. In contrast, areas that rely heavily on intergovernmental coordination and cooperation, like Economic & Financial Affairs (or ‘Macroeconomics’ in the categorisation

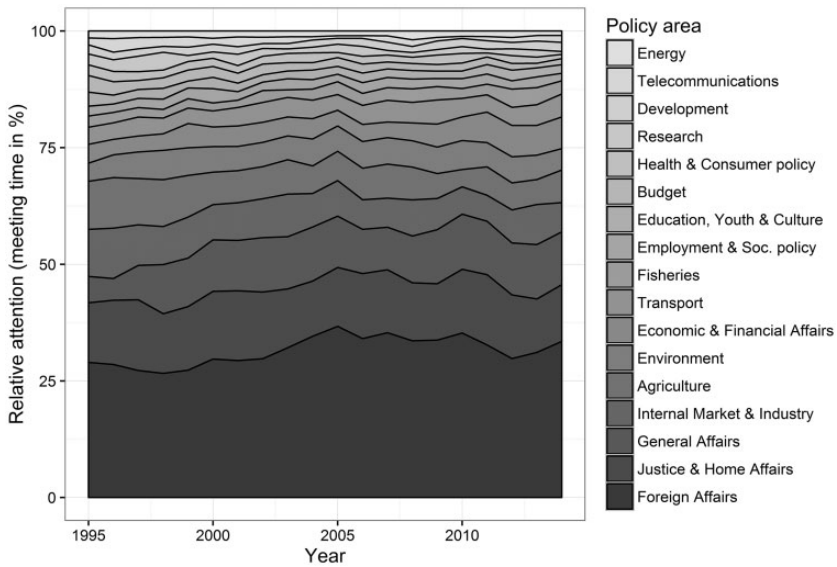


Figure 3. Distribution of attention across time, 1995–2014.

scheme of Alexandrova et al., 2014), receive relatively more attention in the European Council.

Figure 3 plots the relative distribution of attention for the 17 policy areas across time. The relative stability of the distribution is noteworthy. Throughout the entire study period, Foreign Affairs (mean: 31.5%) and Justice & Home Affairs (13.3%) received the highest shares of attention. Since 1998, General Affairs has consistently received the third largest share (10.2%), surpassing the shares devoted to Internal Market & Industry (7.7%) and Agriculture (7.2%). The fourth and fifth largest shares of attention were devoted to Environment (5.4%) and Economic & Financial Affairs (4.6%), respectively. However, the fact that, after 2010, the share of attention devoted to Economic & Financial Affairs has exceeded that devoted to Environment is worth highlighting. Throughout the entire 20-year period, more than 75% of the Council's meeting time was focused on those seven policy areas. Compared to the distribution of attention in the European Council, the Council of the EU's distribution is much more stable over time. This pattern might reflect differences in the organisational structures of the two institutions. Being a single body that meets only occasionally, the European Council's attention is a much scarcer resource than the Council of the EU's: in any particular meeting, only a limited number of topics can be discussed, producing larger changes in the relative amount of attention devoted to particular topics. In contrast, given the more distributed nature of the Council's organisational structure, trade-offs between attention to one or another topic are less pronounced, not at least because the agenda space can be relatively easily expanded by establishing additional working parties.

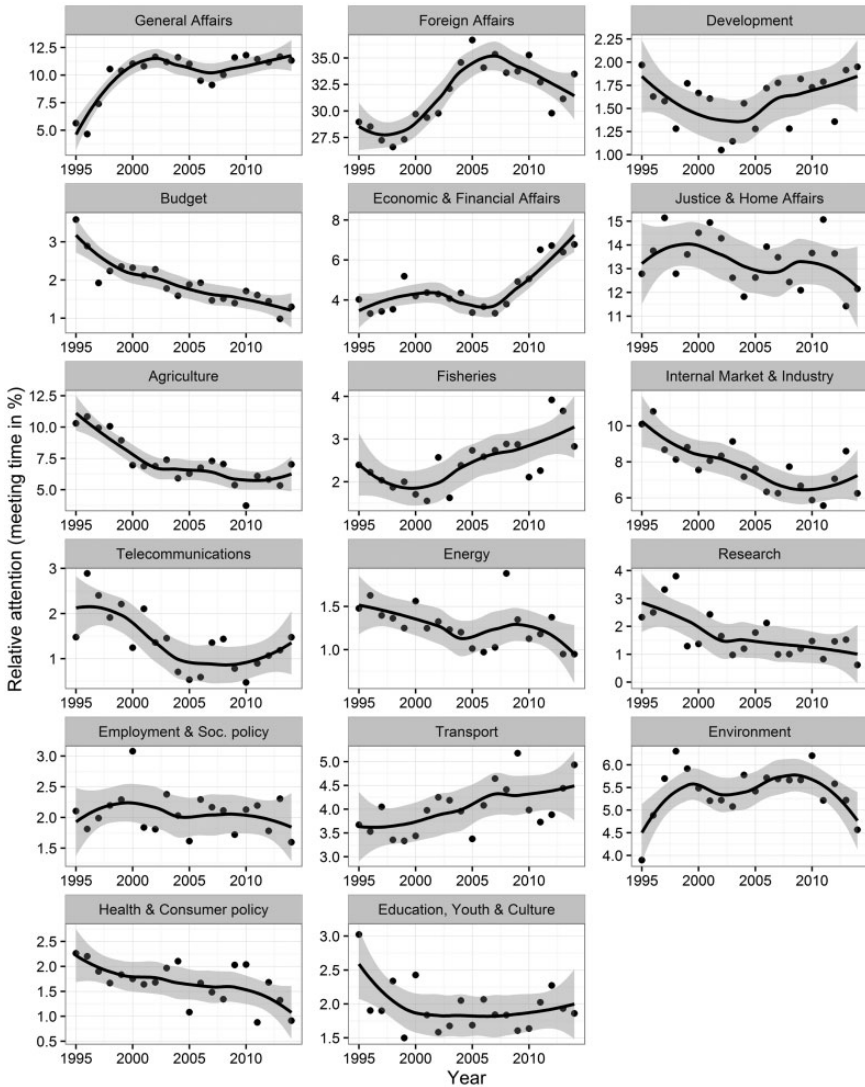


Figure 4. Attention to policy areas over time, 1995–2014.

Even though the larger picture of the relative distribution of attention across policy areas remained relatively stable over time, significant changes in the share of attention devoted to particular policy areas occurred at the margins. Figure 4 plots the share of attention devoted to each policy area over time, together with a curve of fitted values of a locally weighted regression scatter plot smoother (lowess) and a 95% confidence interval. In terms of absolute percentage point changes, the most

significant developments happened in the areas of Foreign Affairs, General Affairs, Agriculture, and Economic & Financial Affairs. The share of General Affairs increased from around 5% at the beginning of the study period to around 10% by 1998. The share of Economic & Financial Affairs remained relatively stable at around 4% until 2008, when its upward trend started, reaching 6.8% in 2014. Foreign Affairs experienced the most substantial increase in attention, from around 28% in the late 1990s to around 35% in the years after the Eastern enlargement. However, this number dropped subsequently again to around 32% at the end of the study period, which is somewhat surprising given the increasing efforts to develop coordinated EU policies in response to international crises. Finally, Agriculture decreased from more than 10% in the second half of the 1990s to around 6% at the end of the study period, illustrating the gradual decline in relevance of this policy area for the EU's activities.

Attention to Immigration Policy, Financial Regulation and Fiscal Stability

By zooming in on meetings of working parties dealing with particular issues, the dataset makes it possible to describe the attention devoted to particular sub-topics within a policy area. A brief analysis of attention devoted to Immigration Policy within the broader area of Justice & Home Affairs and of the attention devoted to Financial Regulation and Fiscal Stability within the broader area of Economic & Financial Affairs illustrates these possibilities. In light of the lack of detailed information about the population and titles of working parties before 1999, both analyses focus on the post-1999 period, but present more thinly aggregated data for half-year terms. Given the salience of Justice & Home Affairs policy in recent years, in particular with respect to immigration, the negative trend in the attention devoted to that area is somewhat surprising. However, Justice & Home Affairs covers a number of different policy sub-topics. Besides immigration, it also includes criminal and civil law matters, as well as police cooperation. As a result of the aggregation process, a positive trend in one sub-topic might thus be neutralised or even outweighed by a negative trend in another. To investigate this possibility, Figure 5 shows changes over time in the absolute attention devoted to immigration and related matters (i.e. asylum and border control) compared to other Justice & Home Affairs issues.

The measure of attention devoted to Immigration Policy is based on the duration of meetings of the Strategic Committee on Immigration, Frontiers and Asylum (SCIFA), as well as the working parties reporting to it, which include the Working Parties on Visa, the Working Party on Asylum, the Working Party on Frontiers, the Working Party on Integration, Migration and Expulsion, the Working party on the Centre for Information, Discussion and Exchange on Asylum (CIREA), as well as the Working Party on the Centre for Information, Discussion and Exchange on the Crossing of Borders and Immigration (CIREFI). The left panel of Figure 5 demonstrates a clear and consistent negative trend in attention to Immigration Policy since about 2003. In contrast, the right panel

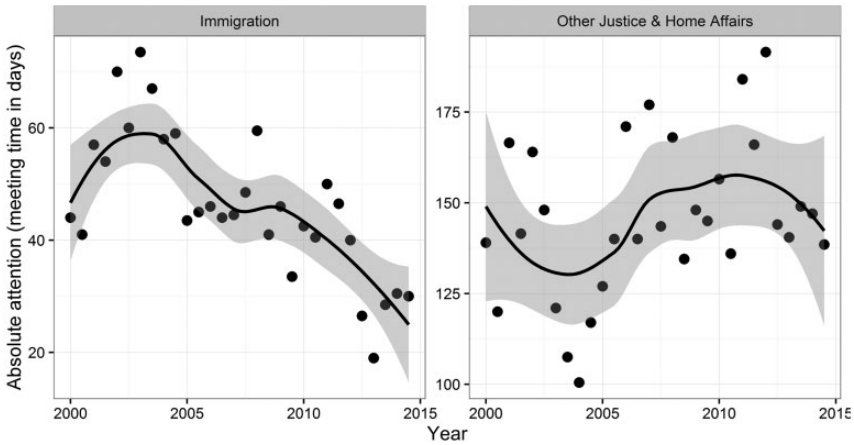


Figure 5. Attention to Immigration Policy and other Justice & Home Affairs issues, 2000–2014.

shows that attention to other Justice & Home Affairs matters was on the rise between 2004 and 2012, only to fall markedly in the last two years of the study period. Thus, rather than masking an increase in attention to Immigration Policy, the negative trend in attention devoted to Justice & Home Affairs policy overall is actually to a large extent driven by a decrease of attention to that sub-topic.

The steep increase in the attention devoted to Economic & Financial Affairs after 2007 could be related to the financial crisis that the EU has started to experience at that point in time. To investigate this possibility further, Figure 6 plots the amount of attention devoted to financial regulation and fiscal stability matters on the one hand, and to other issues covered by Economic & Financial Affairs, mainly taxation, on the other hand. Attention to Financial Regulation and Fiscal Stability issues was measured by aggregating the number of meetings of the Financial Services Committee, the Working Parties on Financial Services (including various sub-groups) and on Financial Counsellors, as well as Ad Hoc Working Parties concerned with the Stability Pact, Economic Governance, Banking Supervision, and the Single Bank Resolution Mechanism, respectively. A comparison of the two panels of the figure indicates that the increase in attention devoted to Economic & Financial Affairs overall is indeed largely due to a more than two-fold increase in the attention devoted to matters related to financial regulation and fiscal stability. However, especially during the last four years of the study period, attention to other Economic & Financial Affairs issues contributed to the overall growth as well.

Attention to the Common Fisheries Policy reform

The last example application of the data examines changes in attention to Internal Fisheries Policy around the legislative process leading to the adoption of a set of

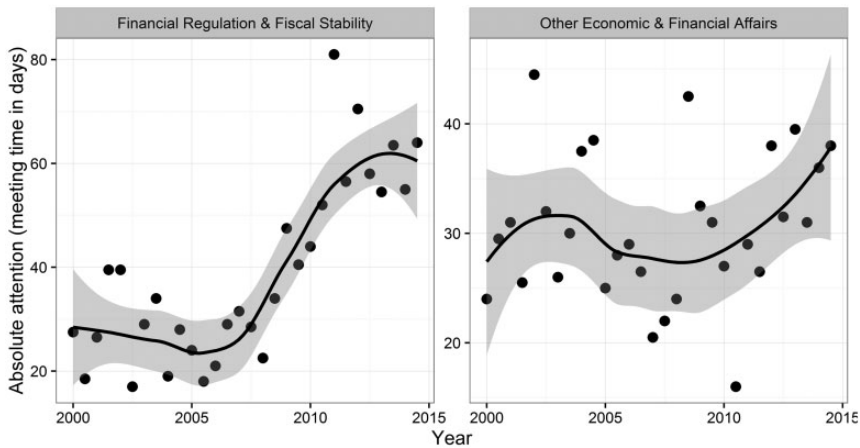


Figure 6. Attention to Financial Regulation & Fiscal Stability and other Economic & Financial Affairs issues, 2000–2014.

proposals for the last major reform of the Common Fisheries Policy in 2013. This application is based directly on the meeting time and duration data, without aggregating them by policy area or time period. Figure 7 plots the duration of the meetings of the Working Party on Internal Fisheries Policy over time, which was in charge of scrutinising the proposals. Note that the working party dealt with a range of other Fisheries issues during that period of time, including the establishment of multi-annual fishing management plans, the annual setting of quotas, partnership agreements with third countries, and recurrent negotiations in regional fisheries management organisations. However, the relevant Presidency programmes are consistent in describing the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy as the top priority.⁸ The reform itself consisted of three regulations, one on the Common Fisheries Policy, one on the Common Organisation of Markets in Fishery and Aquaculture Products, and one on the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, which were largely negotiated as a package.

The following analysis assumes that this complex and fundamental reform of the policy sector dominated meetings of the working party and drove changes in meeting duration over time. Of course, the lack of direct correspondence between general meeting duration and meeting time devoted to a particular agenda item is a limitation in this particular application of the data. However, if a lot of meeting time is devoted to one agenda item, and little to most others, the alternative approach of categorising individual agenda items might actually result in a more misleading description of the distribution of attention than the approach pursued here. In any event, if the assumption was not met, identifying a clear and strong relationship between major reform events and political attention, as the analysis below does, would be very unlikely.

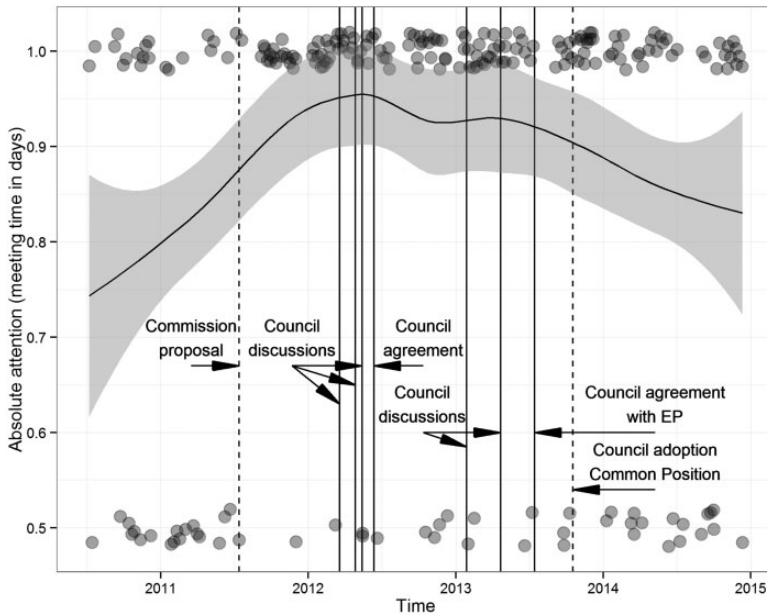


Figure 7. Attention to Fisheries Policy during negotiations on the Common Fisheries Policy reform, 1 July 2010 to 31 December 2014.

The actual legislative decision-making process started with the publication of the Commission proposal on 13 July 2011 and effectively ended with the adoption of the Council's Common Position on 17 October 2013 (see dashed lines in the figure). The Common Position still had to be approved by the EP on 10 December 2013, but because the Common Position was based on the outcome of informal trilogue negotiations, the EP's approval was just a formality. The time frame considered in Figure 7 ranges from 1 July 2010 to 31 December 2014, including roughly a year before the start and after the end of the actual decision-making process. The duration of working party meetings is measured in half-days, i.e. either half a day (0.5) or a full day (1). To reduce over-plotting, the points indicating the dates and duration of working party meetings are vertically jittered by a small amount. The solid vertical lines indicate the dates of ministerial meetings in the Council and the curve is based on fitted values of a locally weighted regression scatter plot smoother. The curve provides a non-parametric estimate of the average duration of working party meetings.

The curve illustrates how the overall amount of attention to Internal Fisheries Policy increased between the introduction of the Commission's proposals on the 13 July 2011 and the informal reform agreement of ministers in the Council on 12 June 2012. In fact, attention peaked around the time Council negotiations reached the end-game stage of ministerial discussions, which took place on

19 March, 27 April and 14 May 2012. After the internal negotiations in the Council were concluded, the amount of attention dropped somewhat at first but only resumed a clear downward trend after inter-institutional negotiations with the EP had been completed. This application illustrates how the high temporal resolution of the data makes it possible to produce a near-continuous measure of political attention in the Council over time.

Conclusion

In many respects, the Council is still the most powerful institution of the EU, fulfilling both legislative and executive functions, and almost exclusively determining the EU's policy in Foreign Affairs. Given the Council's prominent standing in the EU's institutional framework, it is important to know what policy issues the Council pays attention to (or not), and how that changes over time. This article introduces a new dataset of the duration and dates of more than 70,000 Council working party meetings between 1 January 1995 and 31 December 2014. By coding the titles of the 437 working parties in existence during that time-frame into policy categories and subsequently linking them to particular meeting entries, the data allow for mapping the relative and absolute amounts of attention devoted to policy issues at a very high temporal resolution, across the entire range of the Council's policy-making activities, and over an extensive period of time.

The usefulness of the data was illustrated by three example applications mapping attention in the Council at different levels of aggregations. First, an analysis of the yearly distribution of attention across 17 major policy areas shows that attention is quite concentrated in a few areas, and that this pattern does not fundamentally change over time. The Council devotes by far the most attention to Foreign Affairs, followed by other 'high' politics areas like General Affairs, Justice & Home Affairs, and Economic & Financial Affairs, and highly productive classic Community areas like Agriculture, Internal Market & Industry, and Environment.

Second, an analysis of the half-yearly attention to Immigration Policy within the area of Justice & Home Affairs, as well as Financial Regulation and Fiscal Stability measures within Economic & Financial Affairs, suggests that the Council's allocation of attention is reactive rather than proactive. Despite a looming immigration crisis, attention to Immigration Policy has declined throughout the last few years of the study period; and attention to Financial Regulation and Fiscal Stability only increased after the financial crisis hit in 2008.

Finally, the last example application studied the daily attention to Internal Fisheries Policy during the adoption of the Common Fisheries Policy reform (2011–2013) without aggregating the original data by policy issue or time period. The correlation of attention with major events during the decision-making process provides evidence for the face validity of the measure. The analysis also illustrates how the dataset can provide a near-continuous tracking of political attention over an extensive period of time, which is one of its unique features.

The example applications demonstrate that, in many instances, the data allow for meaningful analyses at the sub-topic level. Yet in general, whether such a sub-topic analysis is possible depends on the degree of organisational differentiation of working parties within the policy area in question. As the example applications also demonstrate, an analysis at the sub-topic level may often require the aggregation of meetings of several working parties into meaningful policy sub-topics. This aggregation process requires a moderate amount of knowledge about the policy responsibilities of working parties and the possibly hierarchical relationships amongst them. Presumably, researchers pursuing questions at the sub-topic level in a particular policy area can be expected to possess that type of knowledge.⁹

Despite these caveats, the dataset permits the generation of unprecedented insights into the inner workings of the Council. First, the limitations just discussed do not affect the approach's ability to provide a coherent and exhaustive classification scheme at the major topic level. Given that many if not most existing studies on political attention focus on the major topic level, providing detailed information about the distribution of the Council's political attention at that level over such an extensive period of time is a valuable contribution in itself. Furthermore, the daily working party meeting data provide a high temporal resolution in the measurement of the Council's political attention, which is particularly helpful for better identifying causal effects in explanatory studies. Measurement approaches based on other sources of information are unlikely to produce comparably detailed measures covering all areas of the Council's policy activities over such a long period of time. Given these advantages and the lack of existing alternatives, the dataset creates new opportunities to systematically study the allocation of political attention in the Council at a scale that has not been possible before.

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Notes

1. See the Oxford Dictionary entry at <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/attention> (accessed 20 November 2015).
2. This description of the programming and scheduling process is based on interviews with two officials of recent Presidency countries on 19 July 2012.
3. Article 19(3) in conjunction with Article 1(5) in Official Journal (2009) Council Decision 2009/937/EU of 1 December 2009 adopting the Council's Rules of Procedure. L 325, 11/12/2009, pp. 35–61.
4. As examples, consider the three last working party agendas of the study period published at the end of 2014 (available at http://www.consilium.europa.eu/register/en/content/out/?PUB_DOC=%3E0&DOT_CD=TX%7CCM&i=AGNDTXCM&ROWSPP=25&ORDERBY=DOC_DATE+DESC&DOC_LANCD=EN&typ=SET&NRROWS=5000&RESULTSET=1&TARGET_YEAR=2014 (accessed 2 February 2016)). First, the agenda of the Horizontal Working Party on Drugs of its

- meeting on 13 and 14 January 2015 (CM 5508/14) includes five non-procedural items: one relates to a regulation on ‘new psychoactive substances’, one to ‘minimum quality standards in drug demand reduction’, two to the preparation of a United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Committee on Narcotic Drugs, and one to the preparation of meetings with the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) in the EU-CELAC Coordination and Cooperation Mechanism on Drugs. Second, the agenda of the Working Party on International Environment Issues for its meeting on 16 January 2015 (CM 5551/14) includes two non-procedural sets of items: one set relates to activities in the context of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), especially the follow-up and preparation of United Nations Environment Assembly meetings; another to activities in the context of the UN General Assembly, especially the follow-up on the Rio + 20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development and the Post-2015 Development Agenda. Further details make it clear that the latter set of items relates specifically to issues of environmental sustainability. Finally, the agenda of the Working Party on Schengen Matters of 19 January 2015 include two non-procedural items: one on the evaluation of compliance of the United Kingdom with the Schengen Acquis, and one on the functioning of the Schengen area. In all three examples, the title of the working party reflects closely the type of issues discussed during the meeting.
5. See Council (2015: 2) List of Council preparatory bodies. 5058/15, 20 January 2015. A full list of all working parties and sub-groups by major policy topic is provided in the supplementary online information to this article.
 6. Council (1999) List of Committees and Working Parties involved in the Council’s preparatory work established by COREPER on 24 November 1999. 13406/99, 26 November.
 7. See the Council’s public register of documents (Available at: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/register/en/content/int/?typ=ADV>; accessed 27 November 2015).
 8. Belgium (2010) Six-Month Programme Drawn up by the Belgium Presidency of the Council of the EU; Hungary (2011: 31) The Programme of the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union: Strong Europe; Poland (2011: 26) Programme of the Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union; Denmark (2012: 47) Europe at Work: Programme of the Danish Council Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2012; Cyprus (2012: 26) Programme of the Cyprus Council Presidency of the Council of the European Union; Ireland (2013: 25) Programme of the Irish Council Presidency of the Council of the European Union: For Stability, Jobs and Growth; Lithuania (2013: 38) Programme of the Lithuanian Council Presidency of the Council of the European Union: For a Credible, Growing, and Open Europe; Greece (2014: 49) Programme of the Hellenic Council Presidency of the Council of the European Union: Our Common Quest.
 9. The websites of the Council as well as the recent Dutch and Irish Presidencies provide short task descriptions for all working parties in place at the time (available at: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/preparatory-bodies>; <http://eu2013.ie/ireland-and-the-presidency/abouttheeu/theeuexplained/councilworkingparties>; <http://eu2012.dk/en/EU-and-the-Presidency/About-EU/Arbejdsgrupper/Beskrivelser>; accessed 17 February 2016). The different versions of the ‘List of Council Preparatory Bodies’, available from the Council’s public register (<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/register/en/content/int/?lang=EN&typ=ADV>; accessed 2 February 2016), often provide further references to documents dealing with the establishment or abolition of working parties. The Council document numbers of these lists and other relevant primary documents are also recorded as variable values in the

'lifecycle' part of the data set. For the area of Common Foreign and Security Policy, the Council Secretariat's CFSP Guide is of particular help; see Council (2008) CFSP Guide – Compilation of relevant texts. 10898/08, 18 June 2008.

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