

**COMMITTEE GOVERNANCE
AND SOCIALIZATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION**

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Abstract

This article reviews theoretically-grounded empirical studies on committees in the European Union, by focusing on research published from the late 1990s onwards. The aim is to report on the state of the art and to shed light on emerging puzzles, research gaps and promising venues for further research. We examine research questions, theoretical approaches, design, and the main empirical findings. The conclusions provide our critical remarks and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: European Union, committees, governance, socialization, identity, public administration

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1. INTRODUCTION

From the late 1990s onwards, committees of various types have attracted a considerable amount of attention in the study of the European Union (EU), originating a burgeoning academic literature, which now complements the analysis of established EU organizations, such as the Commission; the Council of Ministers; the European Parliament; the European Court of Justice; and most recently, the European Central Bank. Committees in the EU have become the focus of a lively discussion for empirical and theoretical reasons.

Empirically, there is growing awareness of the fundamental and multi-faceted roles played by committees in the EU. Recent research on inter-governmental policy-making is expanding well beyond COREPER, covering a myriad of Council working groups. The issue of ‘comitology’ has become remarkably salient in the interaction amongst EU institutions. A variety of purely advisory committees, and ad hoc fora, involving regulators, the private sector and independent experts, are also active at the EU level. Sometimes they operate within the framework of Commission’s activities, advising Brussels on policy formulation and the operation of specific tools. Other times regulatory fora discuss benchmarking and EU-level regulatory options independently from a specific EU institution, with either limited formal delegation or the explicit intent to remain outside the formal EU machinery – thus competing and cooperating with formally established committees.

Theoretically, the examination of EU committees provides a fertile ground where to test various hypotheses derived from classic European integration theories, but also from theoretical policy analysis (e.g., policy networks and organization theory) and comparative politics (specifically, the various strands of institutionalism), deploying a vast array of research designs and methodologies, as elucidated below. This is because EU committees are hybrids between formal institutions for decision making, generally

based on intergovernmental bargaining and power politics; and informal fora for deliberation and socialization. At the same time some of them are also gatherings of ‘experts’, where the logic of argumentation and technical knowledge carries much weight.

We review a sample of theoretically-grounded empirical studies on committees in the European Union, by focusing on research published from the late 1990s onwards. We do not cover articles and books dealing with socialization in EU organizations (as opposed to specific committees) such as Egeberg 2006, Hooghe 2001, Smith 2003. Our sample includes committees of various types, such as Council committees and COREPER (Lewis 2005, 2000; Beyers 2005, Beyers and Dierickx 1997, Beyers and Trondal 2004, Fouilleux, de Maillard and Smith 2005, Trondal 2001, Trondal and Veggeled 2003), Commission expert committees (Egeberg 1999 considers transport policy-makers from small member states involved either in experts committees at the Commission or in Council’s groups), and-or comitology committees (Egeberg, Shaefer, Trondal 2003, Pollack 2003). Since our disciplinary perspective is positive political science and organization theory, the vast and influential socio-legal literature on comitology is not surveyed (see Joerges and Vos 1999).

The review is organized around the following key points. We start from the dominant research questions and the alternative theoretical frameworks, and then we zoom on design and variables. A Section is dedicated to the empirical findings. The conclusions raise some critical questions, consider unexplored issues, and provide suggestions for future research.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND TYPES OF SOCIALIZATION

The main *research question/s* addressed in the existing literature tend to be whether socialization effects can be detected in EU committees, namely, Council committees and working groups, Commission expert committees, comitology committees, and in the College of the Commission. Some of these papers also examine

the scope conditions and the factors that can account for the socialization effects, or the lack thereof (Beyers 2005, Lewis 2005). Others pose related questions, such as why some issues are defined as ‘technical’ and others as political in EU committees (Foullieux, de Maillard and Smith 2005) and whether comitology committees are fora for socialization and deliberation, or arenas for rational bargaining, firmly under the control of the member states (Pollack 2003).

Socialization is an important research question, obviously linked to theories about European integration, such as neofunctionalism (Haas 1968), and international relations, such as elite socialization. This means that the literature reviewed in this article is somewhat re-exploring some old puzzles in a novel light and with fresh empirical insights (see also Kerr 1973, Scheinman and Feld 1972).

The *concept of socialization* (Checkel 2005) takes slightly different connotations. However, almost invariably it evokes the acquisition of a supranational logic (the willingness to pursue the European common good so to speak), thus transcending specific national interests. This is the notion of socialization as internalization of norms. Often the willingness to compromise (or to give in on issues that are controversial and/or that can be seen as rooted in the national interests) is used as a proxy to measure supranational attitudes. As discussed further below, socialization is a complex and often ambiguous concept, hence there is the need to differentiate between different patterns of socialization across committees and EU institutions.

Social constructivism draws attention to the internationalization of norms. If we move the focus to strategic role-play, however, we end up with a notion of socialization that is acceptable both to social constructivists and to rational choice theorists. In this case socialization means that actors adjust their strategies to the legal, informational, and organizational opportunities and constraints provided by committees and multiple principals, and their behavior varies accordingly. In both cases (internationalization of norms and strategic role-playing) socialization has an effect on behavior, although the mechanisms differ (Checkel 2005, Trondal, forthcoming).

Moving down the ladder of abstraction, we can distinguish between internalization of supra-national norms and internalization of specific normative views about public policy, especially in committees dominated by expertise. In highly technical committees, participants, although formally representing their countries, can be socialized to a technocratic vision that privileges expertise and Pareto-efficient decision-making rather than the national interest (Majone 1999:295-296). Committee governance is one of the organizational settings in which EU-level epistemic communities are institutionalized. It is unlikely that EU committees can “create” epistemic communities, but they can consolidate them, provide resources, and attribute them formal consultation rights in the making of EU regulation.

Moving further down to the micro-analysis of the contents of ideas prevailing in committees, another, often neglected, type of socialization concerns the specific values or policy paradigms. An example is the ‘stability-oriented’ macroeconomic paradigm that prevails in the Economic and Financial Committee (former Monetary Committee) and in the forerunner of the ECB, the Committee of Central Bank Governors (Dyson and Featherstone 1999). This notion of socialization is likely to vary depending on the policy area (though there might be similarities across policies) and even within different committees in the same policy area. One way in which the discussion of (types of) socialization can be linked more explicitly to theoretical policy analysis is to relate it to the advocacy-coalitions-framework distinction between core beliefs, policy beliefs and instrumental beliefs (Sabatier 1998). On the basis of current research, we can say very little on whether different notions of socialization are complementary or mutually exclusive.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The prevalent theoretical angle is constructivism (often a ‘soft’ version), sometimes combined with new institutionalism, organizational theory, and political psychology. Soft constructivism, unlike hard constructivism, uses positivist methodologies, generating

hypothesis applied to empirical studies, conducting comparative research and using qualitative, process-tracing case studies (Checkel 2003, Lewis 2003). Beyers and Trondal (2004: 919-920) also provide a link with the concept of Europeanization (by showing how member states 'hit' Europe through domestic officials involved in EU committees). Surprisingly, there has been no interest in using the literature on Europeanization and its mechanisms to establish how committee governance hits the member states. If committee members are socialized to new norms and policy paradigms, one should be able to see some changes in domestic policies, unless socialization is so thin that it does not go beyond the creation of communities of discourse (Radaelli 2003).

Several studies engage in competitive theory testing, by deriving hypotheses that are subsequently tested against the empirical record. The theories from which the hypotheses are drawn are often traditional theories of European integration, but also new institutionalisms (rational choice, sociological and to a lesser extent historical), and organizational theory. Only one article (Beyers and Dierickx 1997) engages in network analysis.

The network approach would assist in mapping the interaction amongst various committees, committee members and other organizations. 'Ideational approaches', such as policy paradigms and epistemic communities, are well suited to capture the prevailing (or conflicting) sets of beliefs amongst committee members. The problem is how to identify an epistemic community (Haas 1992) with un-ambiguous empirical tests. Thinking of committee governance, epistemic communities are bound to have a governmental origin rather than being the product of academic and knowledge-based networks (Dunlop 2006).

An alternative to ideational approaches is principal-agent modeling (Pollack 2003; more generally these models can be extended to the analysis of executive politics, Tallberg 2006:198-200). In this approach, committees are seen as agent of political principals (the member states, but in some cases the European Commission, who cultivates its own constituency for support by creating committees of civil society

organizations; see also Franchino 2002, Blom-Hansen 2005; and for a critic to this approach in the study of European Commission see Kassim and Menon, 2003).

In short, Europeanization and public policy theory are still under-subscribed. Yet concepts such as policy networks, advocacy coalitions, epistemic communities and, moving from actor-centered analysis to the ideational dimension of politics, policy paradigms and discourse as carriers of Europeanization and policy transfer are potentially useful frameworks.

4. DESIGN, VARIABLES AND OPERATIONALIZATION

More often than not, the *dependent variables* are supranational attitudes or supranational socialization (sometimes defined as identity formation). Socialization leads to the support for European integration – with variation across types of EU committees and within the same type of committee (controlling for nationality, seniority, and other obvious variables). In several studies, the *independent and intervening variables*, which are incorporated in the hypotheses to be tested, are the factors that might facilitate or slow down the process of EU socialization and the formation of a supranational outlook.

There is a relatively vast array of variables: some are related to the country of origins (e.g., federal or unitary, small or big); others are related to the organization to which the individual belong to (e.g., prestige/self esteem of national civil service for Council working groups, portfolio dealt with at the Commission); others involve interaction patterns (density and intensity of interactions, insulation); finally others look at individual factors (e.g., length of the involvement of committee members in specific EU fora, previous experience with the EU, and more generally previous work experience, which is also related to socialization at the national level). Unlike Hooghe (2001), which deals with senior Commission officials, these studies do not include information on the ‘images of Europe’ (eg intergovernmental or supranational; market making or market shaping; etc) that committees members have.

Furthermore, taking a forward looking approach, in order to broaden the theoretical explanations along the lines identified in the previous section (policy theory and Europeanization) both surveys and detailed process-tracing of how interaction and decisions emerge in complex constellations of actors are needed. This is methodologically more demanding than the current survey-based orientation.

Operationalization and data gathering vary across the literature, even though the vast majority collect data through a close-ended questionnaire. In some cases, the questionnaires are supplemented by semi-structured interviews, either face to face or on the phone, in order to gather additional information, often used for process tracing. Data collection generally takes place in one wave. The sample size varies greatly, from 200 (only for works relying on numerical data, mainly through postal questionnaires, without interviews) to 5 (only interviews, no questionnaire). The time of data collection ranges to from the mid /late 1990s in the vast majority of cases to 2002.

The classic committee governance questionnaires do not include questions on personal political and economic values of committee members (eg left – right positioning in the political spectrum; their views on the management of the economy, attitudes towards the European social model, and normative ideas about the scope of governance, representation and citizenship). There are however exceptions, such as Beyers and Dierickx (1997). Information on education and career patterns are not systematically exploited (outside the committee governance literature, see Quaglia 2005 on this type of analysis).

This is a striking contrast with surveys of bureaucrats at the national level (cf Putnam 1976, Aberbach et al. 1981), but this is partly explained by the difficulty of asking this type of questions at the EU level. There are no policy-specific questions that would lend themselves quite naturally to an understanding of the prevailing policy paradigm (or competing paradigms) amongst committee members. Moreover, except for a few exceptions (Lewis 2005), no attention is paid to *policy areas*, in particular distinction between different types of public policy (eg distributive, regulative etc).

The existing studies on EU committees do not include data on *national elite not involved, or sporadically involved in EU fora*, although in the latter case, the degree and frequency of involvement is sometimes included as a control variable for the effects of socialization (Beyers 2005, Trondal 2001, Trondal and Veggeland 2003). In other words, in terms of individuals included in the survey, there is often a strong focus on officials from the permanent representation. This is being practically beneficial in terms of data gathering. Data from national (technical) elites should be considered by future research as they provide an obvious control variable.

5. WHAT DOES THE EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE TELL US?

The *findings*, in general, tend to confirm the existence of a process of socialization and/or the presence of a supranational outlook amongst officials interacting in EU fora. However, most of the time such effect is weak, or subject to scope conditions, which often have little to do with EU fora, but are instead more related to domestic level factors (Beyers 2005). Moreover, EU and/or committee identity (and the pursuit of European interests) comes after or coexist with national identity (and the protection of national interests). Let us now look at the main findings in a more detailed manner.

Beyers (2005) examines the dynamics at play in the Council working groups, investigating the ‘role conception’ of committee members, defined as the norms held by the national representatives concerning what constitute an appropriate behavior in the Council working groups. The findings reject a ‘strong socialization hypothesis’ (908), whereby national official would be expected to shift their allegiances to the European common goods, adopting supranational attitudes. Nonetheless, some socialization takes place, that is, a role conception is adopted by national representatives, and it is affected by domestic factors and institutional affiliation, more than European factors. The outcome is that actors adopt different rules and identities related to the multiple contexts in which they are embedded.

Beyers and Dierickx (1997) analyze the Council working groups and perform a network analysis to map communication flows in the Council. Their model of networks resembles a spider's web, with a centre and a periphery. They argue that the ideological attitude towards supranationalism stimulates communication with all potential partners, including the peripheral and the Euro-skeptic. Moreover, actors tend to address their partners more when they view them as influential. Nationality remains an important factor and the negotiators use a 'third image', in addition to the national and the individual ones, to describe and interact with representatives of other member states, viewing them as coming from three broad 'regions' (Beyers and Dierickx 1997: 464), that is the 'centre of Europe' – the UK, Germany, France – the 'periphery', such as Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Ireland and the 'north'.

Beyers and Trondal (2004) examine Council working parties, asking whether and under what conditions supranational or intergovernmental approaches prevail amongst national officials interacting therein. They find that, paraphrasing the title of their article, there are different ways through which the nation state 'hits Europe', but it always does so. In other words, the interaction of national representatives in the Council working groups and their adoption (or rejection) of specific role conceptions is affected by the national environment in which these officials are embedded, which can be summarized by looking at a set of domestic institutional factors (eg federal states, presence of veto points, role of the foreign ministry and level of trust in domestic and EU institutions).

Egeberg (1999) considers Commission expert committees and Council working groups in a specific policy area (transport), asking to what extent EU (supranational) role and identity replace or complement the national ones amongst members of the various committees. The starting assumption is that a single individual may have several roles and identities. The findings indicate that a clear majority of the committee members interviewed feel an allegiance to, or identify with, the EU level, at least to some extent. Moreover, the length of time spent in a committee affects the loyalty towards that same committee – the longer the participation, the stronger the loyalty. Within Commission's expert committees, professional affiliation and educational background count far more

than allegiances to national governments (Egeberg, 1999: 469). To sum up: ‘loyalty shifts may take place, but only marginally... The identity evoked in EU level settings does not replace identities evoked in national institutions; it is, rather, complementary and secondary’ (Egeberg 1999: 470).

Egeberg et al. (2003) examine different types of EU committees, with a view to explaining the dominant behavioral logic (intergovernmentalism versus supranationalism) in committee governance. Their findings detect variation across types of committees: Council and comitology groups are ‘intergovernmental’, whereas Commission committees are ‘more multi-faceted’, and expert knowledge plays an important role in the decision making process, in that participants give more weight to arguments advocated by members who have demonstrated considerable expertise rather than to views advanced by colleagues from large member states. Comitology committees display several intergovernmental features, as do the Council working parties, in contrast to previous research that portrayed comitology as an arena for deliberation. Participants in experts’ committees generally are not deeply involved in the policy-making process at the national level, and they are seldom given a clear mandate on how to act in the committees. EU committees represent rather secondary organizational affiliations for most national officials (who use most of their time and energy in national institutions).

We mentioned that the political vs. technical orientation of committee members is a relatively un-explored domain of socialization. Looking at Council working group and COREPER, Fouilleux et al. (2005) raise the question why some issues are defined as political and passed on to ambassadors and deputy ambassadors in COREPER, whilst others are decided by working groups. They conclude that the distinction between technical and political issues is rarely clear-cut and it is constantly defined and redefined. Generally, if an agreement cannot be reached at the level of the working group, it goes up to COREPER. However, the empirical record shows that ‘less is left for ministers to decide on than one might have thought’ (Fouilleux et al. 2005: 614). The divide between technical and political moves across EU presidencies: some countries use COREPER more intensively than others, who prefer technical working groups (Fouilleux et al 2005:

613). Small countries prefer to process issues within working groups because in COREPER the large member states carry more weight in decision making, whereas this is less the case in working groups.

Does COREPER, analyzed by Lewis (2000; 2005), socialize policy-makers into a 'Brussels based collective culture' (937)? Socialization takes place - Lewis argues - but subject to two main scope conditions, namely high issue intensity and isolation from domestic politics, which in the end facilitate agreements. Additionally, he identifies two socialization mechanisms: 'strategic calculation and role play' and 'normative suasion'.

Pollack (2003) addresses the question of whether comitology committees are control mechanism in the hand of the member states to monitor the activities delegated to the Commission or whether they are fora for deliberative democracy. By competitively testing a rationalist approach and a sociological institutionalist approach against the empirical record of the process through which some comitology committees were established, he finds that evidence supports a rationalist interpretation, although deliberation in the committees might take place under certain conditions.

Overall, these findings highlight an interesting puzzle. Whereas some authors, for instance, Lewis have found evidence of EU-socialization, others, such as Pollack, remain rather agnostic about socialization. This is partly due to the different empirical cases examined by the various authors, but partly reflects the choice of different theoretical standing points. If someone starts with a socialization framework in mind, chances are that this author will find some evidence of socialization. The suggestion for those starting with socialization is to be more precise on the null hypothesis of what is not included in the concept of socialization.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Committee governance can be studied by using three different theoretical perspectives, specifically socialization, principal-agent models, and epistemic communities. On balance, the socialization perspective tends to be silent or un-necessarily optimistic on the

normative dimensions of committee governance. Principal-agent models have problems in dealing with the fact that committees are goal-oriented entities with multiple objectives (a point raised by Meier and O'Toole 2006). The agent can respond to a principal on one goal but move away from control on another goal. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to predict and therefore test empirically the total degree of political control in EU committees by drawing on principal-agent models. By adopting the epistemic community approach, we may end up making the assumption that there are shared causal beliefs (otherwise one cannot speak of an epistemic community), whilst the presence and strength of causal beliefs should be established via empirical analysis.

We are not aware of research informed by a fourth perspective, that is, representational bureaucracy, looking at passive and active representation (Meier and O'Toole 2006). Passive representation means that committee members resemble those who are 'represented' in socio-demographic or political terms (social status, political parties, type of firm, and so on). Active representation takes place when the representative performs in a way that (at least in the representative's understanding) will benefit the represented' (Meier and O'Toole 2006). By using these two dimensions and appropriate survey techniques, we can determine when members of a committee make choices in response to political demands, in the interests of their epistemic knowledge, or for bureaucratic self-interest (Radaelli 2007).

This article has shown that the dominant source of inspiration is socialization. But even within this framework, alternative notions have not been tested explicitly, theoretical perspectives have not been broadened enough, and the usefulness of the empirical findings as explanations of where EU policy and politics are directed (for example towards 'neo-liberal' or 'social Europe', or towards 'more' or 'less' Europeanization) remains questionable.

The link between socialization and legitimacy is also barely explored (for an exception, see the concluding chapter in Christiansen and Larsson 2007). Does committee governance produce new mechanisms of policy legitimacy? If so, is legitimacy based on (a) collective deliberation in the shadow of supranational norms, (b) Pareto-efficient

choice and the systematic assessment of the impacts of proposals, or (c) bargaining facilitated by the organizational rules operating within committees? Are committee members the carriers or *mediateurs* of a new European *référentiel* (borrowing from Pierre Muller's language 1995) based on 'rational' decision-making or does adversarial, interest-based politics ultimately prevail? How do specific tools for ex ante policy appraisal and ex post evaluation operate as intervening variables, for example by strengthening economics and rational argumentation in policy choice?

The questionnaires used so far are too 'light' to answer these important questions. Yet these are precisely the questions that can tell us whether there are friction effects between the conventional mechanisms of legitimacy operating in classic democratic arenas at the national level and new forms of legitimacy typical of independent regulatory authorities and the EU regulatory state (Majone 1996).

Another un-explored linkage is between socialization and 'winners and losers'. Who are the winners and losers of Europeanization processed triggered by the redefinition of identities and socialization of technical elites within committees? This is an important question. Potentially at least, it connects the analysis of Europeanization to conflict and power. As shown by Peter Mair (2004), all too often we ignore politics and its implications in our discussions of Europeanization - this comment can be extended to most of the literature on committee governance in the EU.

To answer this type of macro-political questions, we have to deal with the issue of how to move from micro-level analysis to macro-level analysis, as highlighted in Zurn and Checkel (2005). Finally, we should think more in a quasi-experimental fashion, by comparing committees and socialization processes in the EU with other international organizations, such as the OECD or WTO committees¹. This would permit to extrapolate features that are EU specific, as well as those that are more general across international organizations.

¹ Martin Marcussen, Jarle Trondal, Frode Veggeland and Torbjorn Larsson are exploring this dimension in a their project 'The Dynamics of International Executives: A Comparative Study of the European Commission, the OECD Secretariat and the WTO Secretariat'.

Acknowledgements

Research for this article was funded by a grant from the INTUNE project (Integrated and United? A quest for Citizenship in an ever closer Europe) financed by the Sixth Framework Program of the European Union, Priority 7, Citizens and Governance in a Knowledge Based Society (CIT3-CT-2005-513421). We wish to thank Martin Marcussen, Karl O'Connor, Adriaan Schout, Jarle Trondal and an anonymous reviewer for comments on an earlier draft. The usual disclaimer applies.

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