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A Not So Technocratic Executive? Everyday Interaction between the European Parliament and the Commission

MORTEN EGEBERG, ÅSE GORNITZKA and JARLE TRONDAL

The European Commission, although generally portrayed as a technocratic, non-majoritarian institution, or as an agent of EU member governments, has become increasingly linked to the European Parliament (EP) through a range of semi-parliamentary measures intended to increase the executive's legitimacy and accountability. In this article we argue that in addition to several highly visible and often treaty-based control instruments, an almost symbiotic, less visible, routine relationship can be observed between the two institutions. Based on an online survey of EP staff, as well as on minutes from EP committee meetings, this article examines the daily interaction taking place between the Commission and the EP, particularly at the level of officials. Although mutual interdependence in the legislative process may trigger daily interaction, the theoretical argument proposed is that the latter is facilitated and reinforced under two particular conditions: (i) if the two institutions share similar organisational patterns, and (ii) if they share similar behavioural patterns. Three such patterns are emphasised: sectoral, ideological and supranational.

Despite accountability being a recurrent theme in EU scholarship (e.g. Bovens *et al*. 2010) and more generally (Olsen forthcoming), the everyday inter-institutional relationship between EU institutions has escaped wider attention and is poorly documented (however see Brandsma 2012). This article examines the *everyday* relationship between the European Commission (Commission) and the European Parliament (EP). The research question posed is: to what extent and under what conditions does the relationship between the EP and the Commission form a living inter-institutional tie whereby the Commission is subject to daily parliamentary attention, but where the Commission may

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also influence the EP's choices? Given that the EP and the Commission are mutually interdependent when it comes to achieving legislative and budgetary outputs, it is understandable that they try to anticipate and shape each other's actions through frequent interaction. This article argues that such interaction is facilitated and reinforced under two particular conditions:

(1)   if the two institutions share similar organisational patterns;
(2)   if the two institutions share similar behavioural patterns.

Three such patterns are emphasised in this article: sectoral, ideological and supranational. An organisational approach suggests that it is more likely that living institutional ties would emerge between the Commission and the EP than – for example - between the Commission and the Council, or between the EP and the Council. The latter assumption rests on the fact that the Council is characterised by *different* organisational and behavioural patterns than the Commission and the EP. This also implies that the organisational approach may be disconfirmed if living institutional ties of a similar strength emerge between the Commission and the Council, or the EP and the Council. The empirical focus of this study is on the Commission-EP relationship. The observations reported build on an online survey among staff in the EP, on the minutes from EP standing committees at three points in time – 2002, 2006 and 2010 – and on previous empirical studies. The article demonstrates five main patterns:

● First, the EP features a blend of complementary behavioural patterns – a sectoral, an ideological (party-political) and a supranational pattern.
● Second, the three same patterns are also pivotal within the Commission, although the ideological one is only observable at the college level.
● Third, the article documents intimate relations between the Commission at various levels and the EP.
● Fourth, such daily interaction seems to be partly related to similar behavioural patterns.
● Fifth, everyday interaction between the EP and the Commission is deemed important for holding the Commission to account. Regular contact between officials in the two institutions are ranked first in this respect.

Practitioners and scholars hold contending views on how the Commission should be controlled – be it through intergovernmental or supranational institutions, and legal, expert or parliamentary measures. Jean Monnet envisaged the need for a parliamentary assembly, albeit a weak one, at EU level (Featherstone 1994: 152). He advocated the institutional independence of the Commission, largely decoupled from parliamentary attention. By contrast, the present Commission President supports a strong relationship between the Commission and the EP: '[W]e need a more political Europe. This requires a special partnership of the two European institutions 'par excellence' – the Commission and the European Parliament' (Barroso 2009: 4). The Lisbon Treaty, Article 17,

states that the Commission 'shall as a body be responsible to the European parliament'. In fact, executive centre formation at the EU level has long been seen as inherently linked to this centre, being controlled by a supranational legislature rather than by national governments or the Council (Rittberger 2003).

Although the Commission is still generally portrayed as a technocratic, non-majoritarian institution (Featherstone 1994; Majone 2005; Radaelli 1999: 7), or as an agent of EU member governments (Moravcsik 1999; Pollack 1997), semi-parliamentary measures vis-à-vis the EP have been gradually introduced. For example, written parliamentary questions[1] to commissioners offer the EP a means to pursue executive oversight, an opportunity used in particular by MEPs from opposition parties that are not represented in the Council (Proksch and Slapin 2011).[2] Such changes have come into being not only through grand Treaty revisions but also through daily bargaining over competence between EU institutions (Farrell and Heritier 2007; Moury 2007). Contemporary studies of the Commission–EP relationship offer useful catalogues of the tools and instruments of accountability (Fisher 2004; Wille 2010). Effort is invested in classifying these instruments, understanding formal-legal procedures for institutional interaction and information sharing, mapping continuity and change in accountability structures, and also normatively assessing accountability deficit(s) (e.g. Brandsma 2012; Verhey *et al.* 2009). Literature on the Commission reports increased parliamentarisation of the Commission, though largely without an empirical examination of the real world and everyday relationships that are likely to have arisen between the Commission and the EP (e.g. Christiansen 2001; Peterson 2006; Wille 2010 – see however Bauer and Ege 2012). One noticeable bias in contemporary scholarship on the Commission-EP relationship is thus an emphasis on treaty-based instruments of executive control – such as the vote of confidence and appointment of the President and the College (e.g. Dimitrakopoulos and Passas 2004; Wille 2012) as well as on inter-institutional agreements (Stacey 2012).

The augmented treaty powers of the EP may have heightened mutual attention by the Commission and EP. For example, Kurpas *et al.* (2008: 28) report 'that the Commission has reacted with increased attention for the European Parliament'. Moreover, in the aftermath of the 'Lamfalussy procedure' negotiations between the Commission and the EP, the Commission stated that the Council and the EP 'should have an equal role in controlling the way the Commission carries out its executive role' and that it would 'endeavour that the Parliament benefits from equal treatment with the Council' (quoted in Corbett *et al.* 2011: 326). Notwithstanding valuable insights on procedures and agreements for inter-institutional relationships in the EU, the current literature has largely failed to examine empirically the extent to which these relationships are used, by whom and how (see Verhey *et al.* 2009) and the informal practices that may have developed in the interaction between the Commission and the EP. The aim of this article is to suggest ways to fill this scholarly lacuna.

The article proceeds as follows: the next section outlines the theoretical argument. The subsequent section contains method and data. The following

section presents findings on behavioural patterns within the EP and the Commission and on everyday relations between the two. A concluding discussion ends the article.

The Theoretical Argument

Rather than considering the Commission as a technocratic body that finds itself relatively free from parliamentary oversight, we find it more likely that the Commission in its daily life is heavily interwoven with EP activities. Several factors may point in this direction. First, since the Commission and EP, together with the Council, are parties in the legislative and budgetary process, they are mutually dependent as regards achieving legislative and budgetary outputs. For example, in its initiating role, the Commission may be keen to anticipate the reactions of the two chambers of the legislature in order to adjust its proposals to the extent it deems necessary for getting them through. Anticipated reaction is a central mechanism by which the executive shapes its proposal to conform to the expected positions of the parliament. This is a major form of coordination in inter-institutional policy-making (Olsen 1983: 112). Through informal contacts with the EP, the Commission can gain a picture of what is acceptable in the EP and how the EP will react to its proposals. Such consultations between the EP and the Commission take place before clear positions are announced. Inter-institutional contacts of this kind can thus synthesise preferences through social interaction. The more consultations, the fewer surprises in formal decision-making processes. Informal networks define policy options and provide information and expertise to legislators in the Council and the EP (Kohler-Koch 1994, 1997). This also has implications for the EP's ability to scrutinise the Commission outside grand formal arenas.

Expansion of EU competencies has prompted a need for expertise in new areas and a specialisation of policy-making in both the executive and the legislative branch. This, together with an expansion in the role of the EP, should lead us to expect high interaction between specialised policy communities and close links between policy-makers from different institutional backgrounds, i.e. inter-institutional fusion rather than inter-institutional rivalry (Christiansen 2001).

The kind of symbiotic relationship that we argue is emerging between the EP and the Commission may be triggered under two conditions:

(1)   If these institutions share similar *organisational* patterns; and
(2)   if they share similar *behavioural* patterns.

The theoretical argument proposed in this article is that the fact of sharing similar organisational and behavioural patterns makes it easier for institutions to understand each other's way of doing things and to share perceptions of what constitute important issues. It does not imply, though, that the two institutions necessarily always agree. Given that the EP and the Commission are mutually

dependent, strong involvement in each other's daily affairs (dependent variable) may be facilitated and reinforced by the fact that they are both structured according to the same organisational principles and thus, accordingly, seem to share important behavioural characteristics as well (independent variables). We thus expect the organisational structure within which decision-makers are embedded to make some behaviour more likely than others. Decision-makers are, because of limited cognitive capacities, unable to attend to all alternatives and consequences; organisational structure provides simplification that tends to focus decision-makers' attention on certain problems, solutions and lines of conflict (March 1994; Simon 1965).

One key organisational variable supposed to have behavioural consequences is the way in which the structure is horizontally specialised. For example, while we expect a territorially arranged institution to induce spatial perspectives among decision-makers and to focus attention along geographical cleavages, sectoral specialisation will engender sectoral concerns that might cut across territorial borders (Gulick 1937). Another pivotal organisational variable is whether a given structure constitutes a decision-maker's primary affiliation. By 'primary structure' is meant the structure to which a decision-maker is expected to devote most of his or her time and energy: e.g., an official's committee membership is usually a part-time activity and thus a secondary structure, while his or her departmental affiliation makes up the primary connection. It follows that more significant behavioural consequences can be expected to flow from primary affiliations (Egeberg 2004).

Consider then structural similarities between the EP and the Commission. First, the Commission and the EP share 'sectorisation' as one of their basic principles of organisational specialisation. A sectoral arrangement is also visible within the Council. However, the fact that ministers from all member states are present at specialised Council meetings shows that territory remains the *basic* principle of organisation. This is clearly different from the Commission in which only one commissioner is in charge of a particular departmental (sectoral) portfolio. The standing committees of the EP unambiguously express the pivotal role of sectoral organisation within this institution.

Second, the EP and the Commission both contain ideological elements in their structures. This is quite obvious for the EP, given the existence of the transnational political groups. As for the Commission, we know that commissioners are generally political heavyweights with backgrounds as former ministers and parliamentarians (Döring 2007; MacMullen 2000; Wille 2012). The treaty-based coupling of the outcome of the elections to the EP and choice of Commission President can also be seen as strengthening the ideological element at the Commission's apex.

Third, politicians as well as officials in the EP and the Commission both have the EU institution as their primary affiliation (in formal terms), expressing their supranational connection. This is clearly different from the Council, where politicians have their respective national ministries as their primary organisational attachment. In the empirical part of this article, we will turn to

the behavioural patterns present within the two institutions, and then to the daily interaction between the two, interaction that might be facilitated and reinforced by common patterns.

Data and Method

This study builds on three data sources, of which two are original and primary sources. The first is an online survey of administrative staff in the EP; the second is a 'survey' of meetings in EP standing committees attended by representatives from the Commission; the final data source is contemporary research on behavioural patterns in the Commission and the EP.

   A survey was completed among EP officials employed by the EP secretariat as well as officials employed by the various political groups within the EP. Two basic criteria were applied in order to establish the population: first, emphasis was put on staff at the level of administrator/advisor and above (so-called 'AD category'). In this way those officials most likely to be involved in the policy process are captured. Second, among staff at AD level, we aimed to include those most obviously participating in the policy process, thus excluding those in support functions. This means that only relevant AD officials within DG Presidency, DG Internal Policies and DG External Policies were selected for study. As shown in Table 1, the dataset thus includes 327 group officials and 209 secretariat officials. Information about names, positions and addresses were found on the EP's website.

TABLE 1
NUMBER OF RECIPIENTS, RESPONDENTS, AND RESPONSE RATES ACROSS
ORGANISATIONAL UNITS

Political groups	Recipients	Respondents	Response rate (%)
ALDE	43	11	26
GUE-NGL	34	6	18
ECR	37	2	5
EFD	31	5	16
EPP	69	7	10
Greens	35	8	23
S&D	78	13	17
Total	**327**	**52**	**16**
EP DGs			
DG internal policies	137	46	34
DG external policies	43	13	30
DG presidency	29	10	34
Total	**209**	**69**	**33**
Total (survey)	**536**	**118**[1]	**22**

Note: 1. 118 submitted a completed questionnaire. Totalling the group respondents (52) and EP secretariat respondents (69) gives 121, as some respondents were employed both places.

Before the online questionnaire was circulated, the secretary general of each of the seven political groups as well as of the EP secretariat was informed by 'written procedure' about the project. After two reminders, 99 responses were registered. Recipients were informed of the low response rate, particularly as regards the political groups, with the result that the number of respondents rose to 118 (22 per cent). Table 1 reveals a striking difference in terms of response rates between the political groups on the one hand and the secretariat's directorates general on the other, a difference which is difficult to account for. While group officials make up a clear majority of recipients, they constitute a minority of respondents. Thus, as regards the variable 'organisational affiliation' (whether one is employed by a group or the EP secretariat), the data are not representative for the selected population as a whole. In the data presentation, this will be handled by controlling for officials' organisational affiliation. The data do not reveal the degree to which it is representative along other dimensions. Since the response rate is 33 per cent within the EP secretariat, it is more likely that representativeness is better here than among group officials, but this is not necessarily the case. It follows that results should be interpreted with care, particularly regarding group staff. On the other hand, if plausible and significant patterns are observed across several variables, one might ascribe more trust to the findings. In the end, our best argument might be that these are the only available data of this kind for the time being; to quote Rogelberg and Stanton (2007: 198):

> In the absence of good information about presence, magnitude, and direction of non-response bias, ignoring the results of a study with a 10% response rate – particularly if the research question explores a new and previously unaddressed issue – is just as foolish as assuming that one with a response rate of 80% is unassailable.

Secondly, a 'survey' was made of the meetings that occur every year in the EP standing committees, which Commission representatives may attend. This survey counts actual meetings in these committees at three points in time: 2002, 2006 and 2010. This dataset thus supplements the above survey with data on interaction between the EP and the Commission which are not subject to perceptional errors among respondents. This dataset is based on minutes from the websites of EP standing committees. However, not all minutes are available on the websites of EP standing committees. Some, moreover, are also censored as regards participants. In effect, this dataset is likely to under-report the frequency of inter-institutional meetings between the EP and the Commission as well as the number of participants attending these meetings. These data include only EP standing committees that existed in all three periods.

Three caveats should be made: first, the first survey faces the danger of eliciting socially desirable answers. For example, EP secretariat officials might under-report the extent to which they assign weight to partisan interests.

However, it is reasonable to expect that the *anonymity* that the online survey guarantees respondents makes this source of error less likely. A second caveat concerns self-selection: could it be that, e.g., party-group personnel would have emphasised partisan concerns even before they entered the EP – so affiliation to an EP group has little impact on their behaviour? However, the fact that they have contact with commissioners/cabinets who share their party-political leaning indicates that their behaviour is highly job-/EP-related. The final caveat regards the bias in the primary datasets available to this study as a whole. There might be problems of validity pertaining to the lack of primary data on MEPs and the Commission. This lack of perfect comparative data measuring inter-institutional relationships is compensated for by the inclusion of available empirics previously published in the literature. The empirical conclusions drawn are meant to be suggestive, illuminating important theoretical lessons as to the conditions for the emergence of living institutional ties between different parts of the legislative branch and the executive branch of government at EU level.

Results

This section is organised according to the template suggested above. Whereas the first sub-section reveals some key behavioural patterns of the EP and the Commission (independent variable), the second explores inter-institutional relationships between the two institutions (dependent variable).

Behavioural Patterns of the EP

According to the main theoretical argument presented here, the structure of the EP as a supranational institution, along with 'ideology' and 'sectorisation' as the two main principles of organisational specialisation, should shape the behavioural pattern of the EP. As concerns EP officials, our study clearly underlines the link between organisational structure and behavioural patterns. We asked officials in the EP administration how they emphasise particular concerns and considerations when doing their daily work. Firstly, as Table 2 shows, officials in the EP have a primary affiliation towards the EU level – EP staff rank common/overall European concerns far above national ones. Such concerns are their primary point of reference. Secondly, reflecting sectoral affiliation towards standing committees (see Egeberg *et al*. 2013), officials in the EP also tend to emphasise the concerns of the policy sector in which they work. These two concerns constitute a *common* set of concerns to which EP officials give weight. However, there is significant patterned variation based on their internal employment in the EP. Party-political concerns are emphasised significantly more by officials employed by political groups than those employed by the EP Secretariat.

As concerns elected MEPs, studies of their voting behaviour and committee work also underline the significance of the primary organisational structure for

TABLE 2
EP OFFICIALS WHO ASSIGN MUCH WEIGHT TO THE FOLLOWING CONCERNS/
CONSIDERATIONS, BY ORGANISATIONAL POSITION (% AND PEARSON'S *R*)

	Employed by the EP	Employed by political groups	Pearson's r^a
– Party-political concerns/considerations	27	84	−0.61**
– The concerns of the policy sector in which I work	65	59	0.16
– Common/overall European concerns	77	74	0.20*
– National concerns	8	33	−0.37**
Mean *N*	66	49	111

Notes: *$p \leq 0.05$; **$p \leq 0.01$.
Original question: 'When doing your work; how much weight (on an average) do you assign to the following concerns/considerations?'
Key: This table combines values 4 and 5 on the following five-point scale: Not at all/very little extent (value 1), fairly little extent (value 2), somewhat (value 3), to a fairly great extent (value 4), to a great extent (value 5), not relevant (value 8).
a) Organisational position is coded as follows: employed by political groups (value 1), employed by the EP (value 2). The dependent variables contain the five-point scale described in the key above, thus coding value 8 as system missing.

their behaviour. Scholarship on roll-call votes in the EP over time clearly demonstrates that, even though national parties have a central role in European-level party organisation, MEPs increasingly vote and form transnational alliances according to party-ideological conflict lines (primarily left–right), and not according to nationality (Hix *et al*. 2007).

Furthermore, the committee as the basic 'work organisation' of the EP represents an important stage of the legislative process according to sector (Corbett *et al*. 2011). The decisive role that EP standing committees play in processing and amending policy proposals, as well as in consensus-/coalition-building also make them coveted access points for lobbying interests groups from their respective sectors (Greenwood 2011: 40–43). Membership of EP committees is a core organisational affiliation of MEPs and one that may prompt a sector-based pattern of action in the EP. In brief, the EP features a blend of three behavioural patterns: a party-political pattern, a sectoral pattern and a supranational pattern.

Behavioural Patterns of the Commission

Given the organisational characteristics of the Commission we could expect an overlap in the behavioural patterns – supranational, sectoral and ideological patterns – between the Commission and the EP. How then are the behavioural patterns of the Commission perceived from the vantage point of the EP? Table 3 reveals what profiles (sectoral, ideological and/or national) Commission proposals reflect as reported by EP officials. A very clear pattern emerges in these data. According to EP officials, the Commission features two prominent patterns: a sectoral pattern and an ideological pattern. Most frequently, EP officials report that proposals from the Commission reflect the sectoral/portfolio

TABLE 3
EP OFFICIALS REPORTING THAT THE COMMISSION'S PROPOSALS REFLECT THE
FOLLOWING, BY ORGANISATIONAL POSITION (% AND PEARSON'S R – RANKED BY
FREQUENCY)

	Employed by the EP	Employed by political groups	Pearson's r[a]
– The sectoral/portfolio profile of the Commissioner in charge	54	59	–0.08
– The ideological profile of the Commissioner in charge	17	40	–0.25**
– The ideological profile of the Commission President	20	32	–0.21*
– The national profile of the Commissioner in charge	16	12	0.08
– The dominant ideological profile of the EP	5	28	–0.21*
Mean N	64	50	113

Notes: *$p \leq 0.05$; **$p \leq 0.01$.
Original question: 'How often (on an average) do you feel that the Commission's proposals reflect the following?'
Key: This table combines values 4 and 5 on the following five-point scale: never/very seldom (value 1), fairly little (value 2), somewhat (value 3), fairly often (value 4), very often (value 5).
a) Organisational position is coded as follows: Employed by political groups (value 1), employed by the EP (value 2). The dependent variables contain the five-point scale described in the key above.

profile of the Commissioner in charge. This is a shared observation among officials employed by the EP Secretariat and the political group secretariats.

Secondly, EP officials see the proposals as reflecting to some extent the *ideological* profile of either the Commissioner in charge or of the Commission President. The latter finding could be related to the 'presidentialisation' of the Commission (Kurpas *et al*. 2008), with the President's political affinities leaving a bigger imprint on the Commission's proposals. The staff working for the political party groups are significantly more prone to emphasise that the Commission's proposals reflect its political ideologies, whereas those employed by the EP are less inclined to see an ideological orientation in the Commission's proposals. Both groups of respondents, however, see less 'national colour' reflected in Commission proposals than sectoral and ideological concerns.

Finally, almost one-third of staff employed by political groups report that the political constellation in the EP is mirrored in proposals issued by the Commission. The EP secretariat does not share this view. A cautious reading of this finding is that this may reflect some degree of parliamentarisation of the EP–Commission relationship, where the Commission is increasingly attentive to the ideological profile of the EP.

These results indicate that the same patterns of behaviour are central both in the EP and the Commission. This is supported by studies of the Commission's political leadership and administration, although the ideological behavioural pattern has in these studies only been observed within the College of Commissioners, and not to the same extent as in the present study (Egeberg

2006). Commissioners most frequently evoke the role in which they represent their sectoral area of responsibility, Secondly they act on behalf of the Commission as such. Both a sectoral and a supranational behavioural pattern seem to be more prevalent than acting according to country of origin or party affiliation, although Egeberg (2006) finds all four role orientations to be present at the political apex of the Commission. Wonka (2008) observes both national and sectoral patterns in commissioners' behaviour, but finds no support for party-political behaviour.

Studies of the behaviour and dynamics of the Commission *administration* based on survey or interview data with officials provide evidence of Commission officials' behavioural pattern as being both sectoral and supranational. Commission civil servants express affinity first and foremost towards the department to which they belong and their respective DGs represent the main frame of reference for decision-making (Trondal *et al.* 2010). At the administrative level, there is no evidence of an ideological behavioural pattern. This pattern is also recorded in studies of inter-departmental conflict in Commission policy-making (see e.g. Cini 2000; Cram 1994; Hooghe 2000; Vestlund 2012). Since departments tend to be organised according to policy sectors and sub-sectors, this translates into a sectoral pattern of conflict.

Daily Interaction between the EP and the Commission

First, we turn to the contact pattern between EP officials and the Commission. In the survey of EP staff, respondents were asked about their contacts at work. Previous research shows that EP officials carry out a multiplicity of tasks, including tasks that might provide opportunities for exerting influence on MEPs, such as drafting documents, giving advice and facilitating compromises

TABLE 4
EP OFFICIALS HAVING FREQUENT CONTACT (MEETINGS, EMAILS, PHONE ETC.) WITH THE FOLLOWING INSTITUTIONS, BY ORGANISATIONAL POSITION (% AND PEARSON'S R – RANKED BY FREQUENCY)

	Employed by the EP	Employed by political groups	Pearson's r^{a}
– Commission DG(s)	52	36	0.17
– Commissioner(s)/cabinet(s)	17	35	−0.19*
– Commission General Secretariat	14	16	0.02
– Council Presidency	26	18	0.12
– Council Secretariat	30	12	0.38**
Mean N	67	50	116

Notes: *$p \leq 0.05$; **$p \leq 0.01$.
Original question: 'How often are you in contact (meetings, e-mails, phones etc.) with the following?'
Key: This table combines values 4 and 5 on the following five-point scale: Never/very seldom (value 1), fairly little (value 2), somewhat (value 3), fairly often (value 4), very often (value 5).
a) Organisational position is coded as follows: Employed by political groups (value 1), employed by the EP (value 2). The dependent variables contain the original five-point scale.

(Egeberg *et al.* 2013). Table 4 shows that officials in the EP administration have frequent contact with the Commission. Contacts tend to be directed primarily towards Commission DGs. EP officials employed in the EP Secretariat enjoy more frequent contacts with Commission DGs than their colleagues in political group secretariats. Reflecting the stronger party-political pattern within the political group secretariats, these officials report that they have relatively frequent contact with commissioner(s) and cabinet(s). In Table 4 we have included EP officials' contact with the Council. Like the EP and the Commission, the EP and the Council are mutually dependent as regards legislative and budgetary outputs. However, the amount of contact with the Council is much lower than with the Commission. We interpret this finding as supporting our argument about the facilitating role of similar organisational and behavioural patterns. As argued, the EP does not share these patterns with the Council to the same degree as with the Commission.

Table 5 reveals the reasons EP officials give for having contacts with commissioners and cabinets. EP officials mainly emphasise having contacts with commissioners and cabinets with a similar sectoral portfolio. However, those employed by political groups also tend to emphasise contacts based on the party-political leaning of commissioners and cabinets ($r = -0.47^{**}$). Thus, these findings indicate that the tight everyday relationship between the two supranational institutions is related to common behavioural patterns.

TABLE 5
EP OFFICIALS REPORTING THE FOLLOWING REASONS *FOR HAVING CONTACTS WITH* COMMISSIONER(S) AND CABINET(S), BY ORGANISATIONAL POSITION (% AND PEARSON'S *R*)

	Employed by the EP	Employed by political groups	Pearson's r[a]
– Because of commissioner's/cabinet's party-political leaning	2	13	0.47**
– Because of commissioner's/cabinet's similar sectoral or functional portfolio(s)	42	36	–0.02
– Due to EP's role of monitoring the executive	32	13	0.27**
– Because the Commission aims to anticipate the views of the EP on forthcoming Commission proposals	17	17	0.00
Mean N	55	45	100

Note: **$p \leqslant 0.01$.
Original question: 'When you are in contact with a particular Commissioner or cabinet; what are the main reasons (on average) for these contacts?'
Key: This table combines values 4 and 5 on the following five-point scale: Not at all/very little extent (value 1), fairly little extent (value 2), somewhat (value 3), to a fairly great extent (value 4), to a great extent (value 5), no contact (value 8).
a) Organisational position is coded as follows: Employed by political groups (value 1), employed by the EP (value 2). The dependent variables contain the five-point scale described in the key above, thus coding value 8 as system missing.

At the same time, daily interaction between the two institutions is also based on a need for mutual monitoring and for anticipating reactions. The importance attached to monitoring the Commission is primarily reported by officials employed by the EP Secretariat (32 per cent) and much less by political group officials. We also find that contacts between commissioners/cabinets are to some extent maintained because the Commission wants to anticipate the reactions to its proposals in the EP. This supports the idea that inter-institutional contact should be seen as part of a 'sounding out' process, motived by the Commission's need to calibrate its proposals in line with the major legislator in the EU. Common organisational and behavioural patterns are not the only foundation for maintaining tight interaction between EP and the ommission.

Table 6 reports the meetings that occur every year between the Commission and EP standing committees, i.e. a venue where MEPs may interact directly with Commission representatives. Table 6 counts actual meetings at three points in time: 2002, 2006 and 2010. These figures thus supplement the questionnaire data reported above with registered meetings between the two institutions. Two key findings are noticeable. First, there is indeed a high frequency of meetings between the Commission and EP standing committees. In fact it is quite rare for EP standing committees to meet formally without the Commission being present. These findings thus support the perceptions reported by EP officials on the intimate everyday contacts between these branches of EU government.

The second main observation is the high degree of stability in the frequency of meetings across time. Reports from 2010 that include *all* EP standing committees reveal a total of 338 meetings with participants from the Commission, involving a total number of 2,518 participants from the Commission. The Commission thus continuously devotes a considerable share of its capacity to interacting with EP standing committees.

In sum, this may suggest some degree of maturity or even institutionalisation of Commission–EP interaction. This says something about the nature of

TABLE 6

COMMISSION ATTENDANCE AT EP STANDING COMMITTEE MEETINGS IN 2002, 2006 AND 2010 (ABSOLUTE NUMBERS)*

	2002	**2006**	**2010**
– Total number of meetings	239	216	279
– Total number of meetings with participants from the Commission	212	198	204
– Total number of participants from the Commission	1260	1266	1216

Note: *Number of EP standing committees included: 14 (Foreign Affairs (AFET), Development (DEVE), Budgets (BUDG), Budgetary Control (CONT), Economic and Monetary Affairs (ECON), Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL), Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI), Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE), Agriculture and Rural Development (AGRI), Fisheries (PECH), Culture and Education (CULT), Legal Affairs (JURI), Constitutional Affairs (AFCO), and Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM).

the legislative process at a stage where Commission proposals get their first and often decisive treatment by the EP. The input that the process of policy-making gets at this stage can make a considerable impact. This kind of interaction with the Commission takes place within a sectoral frame. The implications of the Commission's presence at these meetings are uncertain and potentially manifold. At the very least, this is an opportunity for standing committees to deliberate directly with the Commission over its policy proposals that often are of a highly technical and sector-specific nature. This we can assume may represent part of the *de facto* scrutiny that sectorally specialised MEPs can exercise over the Commission's activities in the corresponding policy field. At the same time, through this interaction, EP committees may become more receptive to Commission views and positions.

These findings underscore the tight web of relations that exists between the two supranational institutions on an everyday basis. How important are these interactions compared to other ways in which the EP relates to the Commission? Table 7 reports the relative importance of some instruments that the EP may use in in order to hold the Commission to account. Importantly, these instruments are of a low-profile nature, in contrast to instruments such as EP approval of Commission President, EP vote of confidence in Commission, etc. The first clear observation reported in Table 7 is the high importance that is assigned to everyday interaction. These are indeed important ways in which the EP can hold the Commission accountable. Regular contacts between

TABLE 7

EP OFFICIALS REPORTING THAT THE FOLLOWING INSTRUMENTS ARE IMPORTANT IN ORDER TO HOLD THE COMMISSION ACCOUNTABLE TO THE EP, BY ORGANISATIONAL POSITION (% AND PEARSON'S *R* – RANKED BY IMPORTANCE)

	Employed by the EP	Employed by political groups	Pearson's r[a]
– Regular contacts between Commission officials and EP/Political Group officials	67	68	–0.00
– Commissioners/Commission officials answering questions	61	50	0.19*
– Debates on Commission statements in plenary and committees	53	49	0.18
– Commission reports on various items (e.g. annual report on Commission activities, on EP legislative initiatives, on implementation of budget, etc.)	53	46	0.19*
Mean N	66	50	114

Note: *$p \leqslant 0.05$.
Original question: 'How important do you think the following instruments are in order to hold the Commission accountable to the EP?'
Key: This table combines values 4 and 5 on the following five-point scale: Not at all/very little (value 1), fairly little (value 2), somewhat (value 3), fairly much (value 4), very much (value 5), not relevant (value 8).
a) Organisational position is coded as follows: Employed by political groups (value 1), employed by the EP (value 2). The dependent variables contain the five-point scale described in the key above, thus coding value 8 as system missing.

Commission officials and EP/political group officials are seen as the most important instrument. But commissioners/Commission officials answering questions in the EP, debates on Commission statements in plenary and committees, and Commission reports on various items are also seen as important by a majority of the respondents.

Concluding Discussion

While fully recognising the considerable range of formal instruments that have emerged over the years allowing the EP to hold the Commission to account, the question motivating this study was to what extent the relationship between the EP and the Commission forms a living inter-institutional tie, where the Commission is subject to almost *daily* parliamentary attention. Is the Commission less technocratic than often assumed and *de facto* less sheltered from political oversight? Building on an online survey among staff in the EP and on a mapping of Commission attendance at meetings of the EP's standing committees, this study demonstrates close interaction between the two institutions. In 2010, as many as 2,500 Commission representatives attended meetings of the EP's standing committees. Moreover, a large proportion of EP staff report that they are *often* in contact with the Commission. This study reports that several rather 'low-profile' forms of interaction, such as MEPs' questions to the Commission and Commission reports to the EP, are deemed quite important in order to hold the Commission accountable to the EP. Most highly ranked in this respect are, however, regular contacts between officials from the two institutions. Thus, the role of such 'everyday interaction' has so far been clearly underestimated in the literature, and deserves more scholarly attention.

How, then, can we explain the almost symbiotic relationship that seems to have emerged between the EP and the Commission? First, given that the two are mutually dependent as regards achieving legislative and budgetary outputs, there is little wonder that they deal with each other on a regular basis: concomitantly, among the reasons officials give for staying in contact across institutions are the need to anticipate reactions and to monitor and influence the other. Second, and this is the main theoretical argument of this article, everyday inter-institutional interaction might be facilitated and reinforced under two particular conditions: (1) if the institutions involved embody similar organisational patterns; and (2) if the institutions involved share similar behavioural patterns. It is thus more likely that living institutional ties would emerge between the EP and the Commission than – for example – between the EP and the Council. The latter assumption rests on the fact that the Council is characterised by *different* organisational and behavioural patterns than the Commission and the EP. This also implies that the proposed organisational approach may be disconfirmed – that is, if living institutional ties emerge with similar strength between the EP and the Council. This, however, does not seem to be the case: We have seen that the proportion of EP officials having frequent contact with the Council is considerably lower than the proportion

reporting such contact with the Commission. The main empirical focus of this study, however, has been on the EP-Commission relationship. Our data, in combination with results from previous studies, document that the EP and Commission share three behavioural patterns: they both operate according to a sectoral, an ideological (party-political) and a supranational pattern. It is noteworthy that the ideological component of the College of Commissioners has not, to our knowledge, been clearly shown before; nor has the rather modest role of nationality. The data suggest that common patterns might facilitate and reinforce interaction: a similar sectoral portfolio or party-political leaning are among the reasons that officials give for having inter-institutional contact.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. The right to put questions to the Commission was incorporated into the Treaty of Rome.
2. Proksch and Slapin (2011) argue that the extensive use of written questions to the Commission is an inexpensive method of executive scrutiny by MEPs from opposition parties. Questions to commissioners become a means for monitoring the Commission and reduce information deficits over European affairs for opposition parties in what they refer to as *the second chain of delegation*.

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