A NOT SO TECHNOCRATIC EXECUTIVE?

Observations on the Everyday Interaction between the European Parliament and Commission

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Abstract
The European Commission, although still mainly 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 in order 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, everyday relationship is observed between the two institutions. Based on an on-line questionnaire survey among 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, not least at the level of officials within the two institutions. Mutual interdependence in the legislative process may trigger daily interaction, however, the theoretical argument suggested by this article is that the everyday interaction is facilitated and reinforced under two particular conditions: (i) if the two institutions share similar organisational patterns, and (ii) if the two institutions share similar behavioural patterns. Three such patterns are emphasised: a sectoral, an ideological and a supranational pattern.
Introduction

Despite accountability becoming 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). Largely unnoticed in the literature so far, this article illuminates the *everyday* inter-institutional relationship between the European Commission (Commission) and the European Parliament (EP). The research question posed is to what extent and under what conditions the relationship between the EP and the Commission forms a living inter-institutional tie where the Commission is in fact subject to daily parliamentary attention, but where the Commission may also influence the EP’s choices. Given that the EP and the Commission are mutually interdependent as regards achieving legislative and budgetary outputs, it is quite understandable that they try to anticipate and affect each other’s actions through frequent interaction. This article argues that such interaction is facilitated and reinforced under two particular conditions:

(i) if the two institutions share *similar* organisational patterns; and

(ii) if the two institutions share *similar* behavioural patterns.

Three such patterns are emphasized in this article: a sectoral, an ideological and a supranational pattern. From an organisational approach it is thus more likely that living institutional ties would emerge between the Commission and the EP than – for example - between the Commission and the (Union) 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 proposed organisational approach may be disconfirmed – that is, if living institutional ties emerge with similar strength between the Commission and the Council, or the EP and the Council. The main 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 partly to be related to similar behavioural patterns.
- Fifth, everyday interaction between the EP and the Commission is deemed important for holding the Commission to account. Regular contacts 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 should it be through legal, expert, or parliamentary measures. Jean Monnet envisaged the need for a parliamentary assembly, albeit week one, at the 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). And, 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 for 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 mainly portrayed as a technocratic, non-majoritarian institution (Featherstone 1994; Radaelli 1999: 7; Majone 2005), or as an agent of EU member governments (Pollack 1997; Moravcsik 1999), semi-parliamentary measures vis-à-vis the EP has been gradually introduced. For example, written parliamentary questions to Commissioners offer the EP an arena to pursue executive oversight, an opportunity used in particular by MEPs from opposition parties that are not represented in the Council and (Proksch and Slapin 2011). Such changes have come into being not only through grand Treaty revisions but also through daily bargaining over competences between EU institutions within the room for change provided by ambiguities left in the Treaties (Farrell and Heritier 2007; Moury 2007). Contemporary studies of the Commission - EP relationship offer useful catalogues of 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 of accountability structures, and also normatively assessing accountability deficit(s) (e.g. Brandsma 2012; Verhey et al. 2009). Also contemporary Commission literature reports
increased parliamentarisation of the Commission, however, largely without empirically examining the real-world and everyday relationships that are likely to have risen 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 the emphasis on treaty-based instruments of executive control – such as vote-of-confidence/non-confidence, the appointment of President and 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 in the Commission and the 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, current literature has largely failed to empirically illuminate the extent to which these relationships are in fact 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 ambition of this article is to suggest ways to fill the scholarly lacuna on everyday relationships between the Commission and the EP.
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 encapsulated 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 the EP, together with the Council, are parties in the legislative and budgetary process, they are mutually dependent on each other as regards achieving legislative and budgetary outputs. For example, in its initiating role, the Commission may be keen to anticipate reactions within 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 in a parliamentary democracy a central mechanism by which the executive shapes its proposal in order for them 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 EP the Commission can gain a picture of what is acceptable in the EP and how EP will react to its proposals. Such consultations between the EP and the Commission are made before clear positions are announced. Inter-institutional contacts of this kind can thus synthesize preferences through social interaction. The more consultations the less surprises in the formal decision-making processes. Informal networks define policy options and provide information and expertise to legislators in Council and the
EP (Kohler-Koch 1994; 1997). This also has implications for the EP’s opportunity to scrutinize the Commission between the grand formal arenas for doing so.

Expansion of the competencies acquired by the EU has prompted the need for expertise in new areas and a specialisation of policy-making, both in the executive and the legislative branch. This together with expansion of 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 about to emerge between the EP and the Commission may be seen as triggered under two conditions:

(i) If these institutions share similar *organizational* patterns; and

(ii) if these institutions share similar *behavioural* patterns.

The theoretical argument proposed in this article is that sharing similar organisational and behavioural patterns make institutions more easily understanding each other’s way of doing things and sharing perceptions of what are important issues and patterns of conflict and cooperation. It does not imply, though, that the two institutions necessarily agree in all respects. Given that the EP and the Commission are mutually dependent on each other, 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.
We thus expect the organisational structure, within which decision-makers are embedded, to make some behaviour more likely than others. Decision-makers are, due to limited cognitive capacities, unable to attend to all alternatives and consequences, however, organisational structure provides simplification that tends to focus decision-makers’ attention on certain problems, solutions and lines of conflict rather than others (Simon 1965; March 1994). 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 on the other hand is supposed to emphasise sectoral concerns that might cut across territorial borders (Gulick 1937). Another pivotal organisational variable has shown to be whether a given structure constitutes a decision-maker’s primary affiliation or only his or her secondary connection. 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 from primary affiliations (Egeberg 2004).

Consider then structural similarities between the EP and the Commission, similarities that are supposed to lead to common behavioural patterns within the two institutions. First, the Commission and the EP share ‘sectorisation’ as one of the 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 components in their structure. This is quite obvious as regards the EP, given the existence of the transnational political groups. Pertaining to the Commission, we know that commissioners, at the time of taking office, are increasingly political heavyweights with background 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 the 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 in which 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 of them represent original and primary sources. The first data set is an online survey among administrative staff in the EP; the second data set is a ‘survey’ of actual meetings in the EP standing committees in which representatives from the Commission attend; the final data source is contemporary research on behavioural patterns in the Commission and the EP.
First, 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 those above this level (so-called ‘AD category’). In this way officials most likely to be involved in the policy process are studied. Second, among staff at AD level, we aimed at including those most clearly taking part in the policy process; thus, excluding those in important support functions such as translation/interpretation, information, internal (e.g. personnel) administration and information technology. Pertaining to the EP secretariat this means that only relevant AD officials within DG Presidency, DG Internal Policies and DG External Policies are selected for study. As shown in Table 1, the data set thus includes 327 group officials and 209 secretariat officials. Information about names, positions and addresses were found on the EP’s website.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political groups</th>
<th>Recipients</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Response rate %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ALDE</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GUE-NGL</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECR</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EFD</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPP</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greens</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S&amp;D</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Before the on-line 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. The recipients were informed about the low response rate, particularly as regards the political groups, with the result that the number of respondents ascended 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. The difference implies that while group officials make up a clear majority among recipients, they constitute a minority among those who have responded. Thus, as regards the variable ‘organisational affiliation’ (whether one is employed by a group or the EP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EP DGs</th>
<th>DG internal policies</th>
<th>DG external policies</th>
<th>DG presidency</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>137</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>43</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (survey)</td>
<td>536</td>
<td>118(^1)</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) 118 submitted a filled-in questionnaire. Summarising the number of group respondents (52) and EP secretariat respondents (69) gives 121. This is due to the fact that some respondents had marked that they were employed both places.
secretariat), the data is 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 does not tell to what extent it is representative along other dimensions. Since the response rate is 33 per cent within the EP secretariat, it is more likely that representativity is, in general, better here than among group officials, but it is not necessarily so. It follows that results should be interpreted with care, and particularly so 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, one ‘survey’ was made on the actual meetings that occur every year in the EP standing committees, in which Commission representatives may attend. This survey counts actual meetings in these committees at three points in time: 2002, 2006 and 2010. This data set thus supplements the above survey with factual interaction between the EP and the Commission, and these data are not subject to perceptional errors among respondents. This data-set is based on available minutes from the websites of EP standing committees. These data, however, have some weaknesses that should be kept in mind. First, not all minutes are available on the websites of EP standing committees. Some minutes are also censored as regards lists of participants. In effect, this data set 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 includes only EP standing committees that existed at all three periods of time.

Three caveats are necessary to make: First, the first survey is exposed to the possibility for getting socially desirable answers. For example, EP-secretariat officials might underreport the extent to which they assign weight to partisan interests. However, it is reasonable to expect that the complete *anonymity* that this on-line survey guarantees respondents makes this source of error less likely. A second caveat deals with the self-selection phenomenon: could it be that, e.g., party-group personnel would emphasise partisan concerns already before they entered the EP so that affiliation to an EP group has little impact on their behaviour? However, the fact that they, e.g., 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 primary data sets 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 that measure inter-institutional relationships is compensated with inclusion of available empirics previously published in this literature. The empirical conclusions drawn are meant to be suggestive, merely 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 subsection reveals some key behavioural patterns of the EP and the Commission (independent
variable), the second sub-section explores inter-institutional relationships between the two institutions (dependent variable).

**Behavioural patterns of the EP**

According to the main theoretical argument in this article, the behavioural pattern of the EP can be expected to be shaped by the structure of the EP as a supranational institution and by ‘ideology’ and ‘sectorisation’ as the two main principles of organisational specialisation. As concerns EP officials, our study clearly underlines the link between organisational structure and behavioural patterns. We asked the 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 ranks 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 a 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 officials employed by the EP Secretariat.

Table 2 EP officials who assign much weight to the following concerns/considerations, by organisational position (per cent and Pearson’s r)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concerns/Considerations</th>
<th>Employed by</th>
<th>Employed by</th>
<th>Pearson’s r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

Scholarship on roll-call votes in the EP over time clearly demonstrates that even though national parties have a central role in the 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 specialises 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 the 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) that 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 profile of the Commissioner in charge. This is a shared observation both among officials employed by the EP Secretariat and the political group secretariats.

Secondly, EP officials see to some extent the proposals as reflecting *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), where the President’s political affinities are leaving a bigger imprint on the Commission’s proposals. Especially the staff working for the political party groups is significantly more prone to emphasise that the Commission’s proposals reflect its political ideologies, whereas the staff employed by the EP is less inclined to see the ideological orientation in the Commission’s proposals. Both groups of respondents, on the other hand, see less ‘national colours’ reflected in the proposals from the Commission than sectoral and ideological concerns. Finally, almost one third of staff employed by political groups reports 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.

Table 3 EP officials reporting that the Commission’s proposals reflect the following, by organisational position (per cent and Pearson’s r – ranked by frequency)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Employed by the EP</th>
<th>Employed by political groups</th>
<th>Pearson’s r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The sectoral/portfolio profile of the</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>-.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commissioner in charge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ideological profile of the</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>-.25**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commissioner in charge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ideological profile of the</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>-.21*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commission President</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The national profile of the Commissioner in charge

- The dominant ideological profile of the EP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>16</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>.08</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean N</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*) p ≤ 0.05    **) p ≤ 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

These results indicate that the same patterns of behaviour are central both in the EP and the Commission. This is supported also 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 respective sectoral area of responsibility, Secondly they act on the 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 political party affiliation, although Egeberg (2006) finds that 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 thus give evidence to the Commission officials’ behavioural pattern as both sectoral and supranational. The Commission’s civil servants express affinity first and foremost with 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. Cram 1994; Cini 2000; 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 to EP staff our respondents were asked about their contacts at work. Previous research shows that EP officials conduct a multiplicity of tasks, including tasks that might provide opportunities for exerting influence on MEPs, such as drafting documents, giving advice and facilitating compromises (Egeberg *et al.* 2013). Table 4 shows that officials in the EP administration have indeed frequent contacts with the Commission. Contacts tend to be directed primarily towards Commission DGs. EP officials employed in the EP Secretariat enjoy more frequent contacts towards 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 contacts towards 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 also mutually
dependent on each other as regards legislative and budgetary outputs. However, the amount of contact with the Council is much less 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 is not sharing these patterns with the Council to the same degree as with the Commission.

Table 4 EP officials having often contact (meetings, e-mails, phones etc.) with the following institutions, by organisational position (per cent and Pearson’s r – ranked by frequency)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Employed by the EP</th>
<th>Employed by political groups</th>
<th>Pearson’s $r^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Commission DG(s)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Commissioner(s)/Cabinet(s)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>-.19*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Commission General Secretariat</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Council Presidency</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Council Secretariat</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>.38**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean N

67 | 50 | 116

*) p ≤ 0.05  ***) p ≤ 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

The next table reveals what 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 ($r = -.47^{**}$). Thus, these findings indicate that the tight everyday relationship between the two supranational institutions is related to common behavioural patterns.

At the same time daily interaction between the two institutions are 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 ‘sounding out’, 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 Commission.

Table 5 EP officials reporting the following reasons for having contacts with Commissioner(s) and cabinet(s), by organisational position (per cent and Pearson’s r)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for having contacts</th>
<th>Employed by the EP</th>
<th>Employed by political groups</th>
<th>Pearson’s $r^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>because of Commissioner’s/Cabinet’s party-political leaning</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>$-.47^{**}$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- Because of Commissioner’s/Cabinet’s similar sectoral or functional portfolio(s)

- Due to EP’s role of monitoring the executive

- Because the Commission aims to anticipate the views of the EP on forthcoming Commission proposals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Because of Commissioner’s/Cabinet’s similar sectoral or functional</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>portfolio(s)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Due to EP’s role of monitoring the executive</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>.27**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because the Commission aims to anticipate the views of the EP on</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>forthcoming Commission proposals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean N: 55, 45, 100

**) p ≤ 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). The dependent variables contain the five-point scale described in the key above, thus coding value 8 as system missing

Table 6 reports actual 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 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.

**Table 6 Commission attendance at EP standing committee meetings in 2002, 2006 and 2010 (absolute numbers)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Total number of meetings</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Total number of meetings with participants from the Commission</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Total number of participants from the Commission</td>
<td>1260</td>
<td>1266</td>
<td>1216</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*) 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).
In sum, this may suggest some degree of maturity or even institutionalisation of Commission–EP interaction. This says something essential about the nature of 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 have 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 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 (non)confidence of 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 EP can hold the Commission accountable. Regular contacts between Commission officials and EP/political group officials are seen as the most important instrument. But both 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.

Table 7 EP officials reporting that the following instruments are important in order to hold the Commission accountable to the EP, by organisational position (per cent and Pearson’s r – ranked by importance)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Employed by the EP</th>
<th>Employed by political groups</th>
<th>Pearson’s r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regular contacts between Commission officials and EP/Political Group officials</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>-.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commissioners/Commission officials answering questions</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>.19*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debates on Commission statements in plenary and committees</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commission reports on various items (e.g. annual report on Commission activities, on EP legislative initiatives, on implementation of budget, etc.)</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>.19*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean N</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*) p ≤ 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)
Concluding discussion

While recognizing fully the considerable range of formal instruments for holding the Commission to account that have emerged over the years, the starting question of this study was to what extent the relationship between the EP and the Commission forms a living inter-institutional tie where the Commission is virtually 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 the meetings of the EP’s standing committees. Moreover, a rather large proportion of EP staff reports 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 in the future.

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 on
each other as regards achieving legislative and budgetary outputs, no wonder they deal with each other on a regular basis: concomitantly, among the reasons officials give for staying in contact across institutions are the needs to anticipate reactions and to monitor and influence the other. Second, and this is the main theoretical argument in this article, everyday inter-institutional interaction might be facilitated and reinforced under two particular conditions: (i) if the institutions involved embody similar organizational patterns; and (ii) 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 often 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 the Commission are sharing three behavioural patterns: they have in common that they both operate according to a sectoral, an ideological (party-political) as well as a supranational pattern. It is noteworthy that the ideological component within the College of Commissioners has not, to our knowledge, been shown that clearly 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.

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Notes

1 The right to ask 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 access to 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.