

Power, Connected Coalitions, and Efficiency: Challenges to the Council of the European Union

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ABSTRACT. This article is concerned with challenges to reforming the voting procedures of the Council of the European Union (EU). The next major waves of EU enlargement will cause the Union to increase to a membership of first twenty-one, and then twenty-six or possibly even more states. How does enlargement affect the Council's inherent "capacity to act" under the currently used qualified majority voting rule? It is demonstrated here that the expected increase in EU membership will most likely induce a larger "status quo bias" as compared to the present situation in the Council if the crucial majority decision quota is not lowered. In addition, the article is responding to some criticism that has been applied against assessing the leverage of EU governments in one of the EU's most important institutions: the Council of the EU. By resorting to techniques that capture the influence of a priori coalitions on the one hand and "connected coalitions" among EU governments on the other—applying *n*-person cooperative game theory—the piece illustrates how the assessment of relative voting leverage in the framework of weighted voting systems may be extended and applied to situations in which the specific distribution of members' preferences is known. These calculations are again relevant in the face of the upcoming rounds of EU enlargement and projects for institutional reform.

Introduction

The institutions of the European Union (EU) are in need of major reform. Before the next round of enlargement takes place in the first years of the new millennium, a series of crucial institutional challenges must be met. Among the most important

0192-5121 (1999/10) 20:4, 371–391; 009642 © 1999 International Political Science Association
SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi)

are the issue of reducing the total number of representatives in the European Commission; finding a new balance of influence among the EU's institutions; and finally, agreement on a new scheme of votes and representation for the member states in the Council of the EU.

This article is concerned mainly with challenges that the Council faces. More specifically, it asks two broad questions with respect to concerns in the face of upcoming enlargement: (1) how does the present voting scheme used in the Council affect the relative influence of EU governments, especially under the assumption that members form certain *a priori* coalitions? And (2) how is the Council affected by enlargement if it basically maintains its present voting schemes?

Since qualified majority voting has become more important in the Council of the European Union (EU), incentives to form coalitions among EU member states may have increased. When several more members are admitted to the Union, this trend can be expected to continue and strengthen. Therefore, this article analyzes effects of this development and indicates repercussions on members' relative influence in the Council's voting procedures. Moreover, enlargement is likely to affect the Council's overall "capacity to act." This crucial issue is also addressed in this article.

If preferences of different actors in the Union or even just in the Council were known *a priori* on a vast range of issue areas (at least on an ordinal scale), other factors such as agenda-setting power and its effects on policy outcomes could be analyzed rather precisely.¹ Unfortunately, however, preferences of the various actors involved are not likely to be known on a vast range of issues, especially with an EU membership of 15 or more. In addition, there are legitimate doubts on whether these preferences would be revealed sincerely and whether they would be stable in the course of the negotiations. Finally, assessing preferences of 15 or more EU members in various policy fields is a challenging empirical task; larger efforts to collect data on this crucial topic may improve research on this theme in the future.

Apart from possible agenda-setting power, an analysis of the influence of member states and of coalitions in the framework of qualified majority votes, even when reduced to a single institution, is more complex than it may appear at first sight. In particular, as several studies have highlighted, voting weights are insufficient measures of voting power, since the constellation of membership and the definition of the relevant "quota" (or decision rule) in a voting body crucially affect the actors' relative leverage. Weighted voting is indeed rather important in the Council: although formal votes are not always taken, the distribution of relative voting power significantly influences the actual bargaining processes in the Council. Current debates on how to re-allocate votes in the face of enlargement point to the centrality of this issue and further negotiations on institutional reform can be expected.

The percentage of votes needed to support a proposal affects an institution's inherent "capacity to act," and thus its relative degree of "status quo bias." This is an essential issue for the EU in the face of forthcoming rounds of enlargement: the addition of several new EU members, in fact, might significantly increase the difficulty of passing bills in the Union, and hence render decision-making more "conservative" on average. This situation, however, is also affected by the relative status and strength of the different EU institutions in the overall institutional framework of the EU.

Although the location of preferences in spatial terms is not likely to be known for a large group of members on several policy issues (and, to add to complexity, the policy-scale may clearly be multi-dimensional rather than uni-dimensional) it can be observed in practice that some EU members, in general, are more inclined

to form coalitions than others. This article, therefore, extends the analysis of more regular voting power assessments—attempts to assess the effects on members of weighted voting schemes—to take the probability into account that some members are more inclined to build coalitions or even “voting blocs.” In addition, repercussions are analyzed when members are assumed to build “connected coalitions” rather than coalitions formed at random. The article will consider the crucial issue of how enlargement influences the relative ease of making decisions within the Council; this analysis is followed by suggestions to adapt the current voting rules, intended to provide background information for the upcoming negotiations on institutional revision.

The article is structured as follows. The first section presents the foundations of some “original” power indices and adaptations capable of taking a priori probabilities of coalition-formation into account. With these extensions, the relative leverage of a priori unions can be assessed. The next section sketches tendencies with respect to members’ preferences and the formation of coalitions among EU governments, as they have been observed in practice, partially on the basis of some empirical data on voting outcomes in the Council. This section also provides information on assessments when members are assumed to form “connected coalitions” rather than just any type of coalition, and some caveats with respect to this issue. The article then demonstrates and discusses the calculations on relative voting power for both individual members and coalitions of members, for the EU’s past and present on the basis of these different methodological approaches. It then turns to the issue of the Council’s relative capacity to act, or inherent “status quo bias,” with changes in the total number of members, finding that the current qualified majority quota significantly affects the Council’s capacity to reach decisions, especially when several more members join the Union. The findings of the study are summarized in the Conclusion.

Power Indices and A Priori Probabilities of Coalition Formation

Two well-known and by now almost “traditional” indices of voting power measure the relative leverage of members within a weighted voting system: the Shapley-Shubik index and the Banzhaf power index.² As do several other indices in this category, they basically provide a “preference neutral” analysis, that is, they consider the occurrence of any coalition among members to be equiprobable.³ Hence, they abstract from specific distributions of preferences and refer to the “skeleton” of institutional design. Both of these indices, however, can be extended to take the formation of a priori unions into account,⁴ if this is considered desirable.

On the basis of empirical observations, one may assign, for instance, an a priori probability p to the formation of a respective “voting alliance.” The values of the new and adapted game can then be calculated as⁵

$$\varphi_i' = p\alpha_i + (1 - p)\beta_i \quad (1)$$

where α_i represents the power index for a player i in the game with an a priori coalition structure and β_i the respective value in the “original” weighted voting game.

Another possibility to account for members’ preferences consists in taking only “connected coalitions” (see Axelrod, 1970) into account. This basically implies that coalitions are only considered to be viable when they are composed of members that are adjacent on a (uni-dimensional) policy scale. Hence, adaptations in this sense

may be very helpful when applied to the EU context when studying national parliaments or the European Parliament (see Colomer and Hosli, 1999). But, generally, it may be somewhat less useful when applied to the Council of the EU.⁶

Generally, the inclusion of the assumption that only connected coalitions form among members poses no technical challenge in terms of calculating adapted power indices. The difficulty with working with such extended indices is rather of a theoretical nature. For instance, with respect to the Banzhaf power index, there may be doubts on how well members may be able to make the threat of a "critical defection" (a defection from a coalition that would be winning, but without the support of the member concerned cannot reach the required majority): if members, generally, form coalitions that are adjacent on a policy scale, it is questionable whether the "center" players can act credibly when threatening not to support the coalition, as this might harm the attainment of their own policy goals. Presumably, members adjacent on a policy scale hold more similar policy priorities than those further away in spatial terms. Another challenge of this extension, evidently, consists in correctly assessing the distribution of members' preferences on the respective scales⁷—a challenging empirical venture. Nonetheless, in order to respond to such criticism, it will be attempted here to show some effects when connected coalitions rather than any type of coalition are assumed to form.

Which coalitions among members have formed in practice? Unfortunately, data bases containing information on members' preferences in the EU are still rather scarce. However, the following section provides some indications and empirical data on the formation of coalitions among EU governments that have formed in the framework of the Council's voting procedures in practice. These assessments, evidently, cannot provide a full picture on voting behavior in the Council. But since some voting outcomes have been published, starting in 1993, it is at least possible to see who voted for or against an issue. Unfortunately, data for later years appear to have the bias that members knew results were going to be published: significantly fewer governments formally voted against proposals in the Council in 1994 through the present than they did in 1993. Therefore, this study will use the 1993 data set, although, by necessity, it can only provide a partial picture of reality.

Preferences and Coalition-formation: Some Empirical Evidence

In the EU, intergovernmental bargaining is crucial, while other factors are also relevant in the determination of policy outcomes.⁸ Policy decisions are often outcomes of intensive bargaining and negotiation processes. The actors involved in the overall bargaining game are not only national government representatives, but also officials of the different EU institutions, most notably the European Commission and the European Parliament. Moreover, actors such as national and transnational lobbying groups appear to play a prominent role.⁹ Accordingly, negotiations that precede decisions in the Council are usually characterized by long and sometimes tedious processes.¹⁰ Because of the connection between domestic interests and intergovernmental developments in the Union, bargaining may best be conceived in the sense of two-level games (Putnam, 1988), in which domestic policy preferences determine the intergovernmental bargaining behavior of EU members. Evidently, in this framework, changing domestic preferences may alter the formation of coalitions on the intergovernmental level (Moravcsik, 1993).

The introduction of majority voting in the Council is likely to have changed the negotiating behavior of the member states. Although formal votes are not

frequently resorted to, the option of applying a majority vote has altered the decision-making reality for the EU member states. This change has certainly also affected decision processes in the Committee of the Permanent Representatives of the Member States (COREPER), a body at the ambassadorial level, which can either make decisions itself or pass them on to the Council.¹¹

Within the framework of unanimous decisions taken on the basis of the Luxembourg compromise, the negative vote of one member was evidently sufficient to block a proposal, so that the requirement of unanimity basically granted all members a veto right. By contrast, qualified majority votes require the formation of a "blocking minority" to prevent a decision from being adopted. In the present constellation of EU membership, a blocking minority consists of at least 26 out of the total of 87 (weighted) votes (or 23 votes when the Ioannina Compromise applies).¹² Correspondingly, in order to support a proposal, a coalition of members needs to be formed that represents a minimum fraction of total weighted votes. In the present constellation, this is 62 out of 87 votes (or approximately 71 percent).¹³

Experiences of the recent past reveal that traditional geographical alliances between member states of the Union may have lost some of their significance. For example, the three Benelux countries, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, which largely acted as a bloc in the first decades of the Community's existence, have started to advocate somewhat different attitudes toward policy issues. The issue of re-weighting votes itself recently constituted a prominent example in this respect. Similarly, classic cooperation between France and Germany, the "Paris-Bonn axis," may be less important today, with an EU encompassing several more EU members than it did in the beginning of the Community. However, this crucial tandem is still significant when it comes to taking actual policy initiatives, its agenda-setting power somewhat exceeding its formal influence in the voting procedures.

With the overall extension of the Union's policy competencies and because of divergent interests of member states in specific sectors, geographical alliances within the Union may thus be somewhat less important today than they were earlier. Nonetheless, there are some "traditional" patterns of cooperation among some of the present EU members that are likely to be preserved in the future. For example, it has been observed in practice that decisions were rarely taken against an alliance built by Germany and France.

An EU with 15 members is evidently more heterogeneous in character and implies other possibilities for coalition building than did the Community of six, nine, ten or twelve, a trend that will certainly continue with the forthcoming rounds of enlargement. Ideal points of new members on selected issues can, at least in the first years after the next enlargement, be expected to be at a distance from those of most of the present EU members. But the picture, certainly, is dynamic. Some of the richer states in the current EU were relatively poor after World War II; some of the likely new EU members, mainly in Central Europe, may shift to a different economic position over time, so that distributions of preferences are also dynamic rather than static. Similarly, the division between the "South" and the "North" in the EU, and soon between the "West" and the "East," may experience changes over time. No coalition or divide is likely to remain stable over decades in the Council.

Which coalitions have formed in the Council in the past? What evidence is available? Have some members been more inclined to cast negative votes in the voting procedures? Although empirical data on the voting behavior in the Council have only recently been made public, it is possible to derive some impressions on the basis of some first published results (Council Secretariat, 1995). Table 1a provides

TABLE 1a. *Voting Patterns in the Council: The Propensity of Governments to Cast a Negative Vote or to Abstain (Dec 6, 1993 to Dec 31, 1994).*

Member state	Negative vote (N) or abstention (A)	Agri-culture	Fisheries	Internal market	Environment	Transportation	Social affairs	Research	Education	European citizenship	Consumer protection	Transparency	Total
Belgium	N	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
	A	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Denmark	N	4	-	3	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	11
	A	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
France	N	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	2
	A	2	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
Germany	N	3	-	3	2	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	9
	A	2	-	3	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	6
Greece	N	2	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	4
	A	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ireland	N	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
	A	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Italy	N	1	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
	A	-	-	1	1	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	3
Luxembourg	N	2	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4
	A	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Netherlands	N	3	1	2	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	2	10
	A	1	1	2	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	5
Portugal	N	2	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
	A	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	1	-	-	3
Spain	N	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
	A	-	5	-	1	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	7
United Kingdom	N	4	1	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7
	A	7	2	4	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	14
Total	N	23	4	16	7	-	-	1	-	-	2	5	58
	A	13	8	11	1	4	4	1	1	1	-	-	44

Source: Council Secretariat (1995)

TABLE 1b. *Opposing ("Losing") Coalitions With Respect to Different Policy Fields, Voting in the Council 1993-94.*

Policy domain	Agriculture	Fisheries	Internal market	Environment	Transportation	Social affairs	Research	Education	European citizenship	Consumer protection	Transparency
Opposing ("Losing") coalitions	{P, UK} {UK} {I} {DM}	{GR} {UK} {IRL} {NL}	{DM, L, SP} {NL, UK} {DM} {G} {G}	{DM} {DM, G, NL} {G} {I, UK}	-	-	{NL}	-	-	{F, G}	{DM, GR, NL} {DM, NL}
(Negative votes only)	{G, NL} {B, DM, L, NL} {DM}		{SP} {F} {I}								
	{GR}		{L}								
	{B, G, NL}		{P}								
	{G, GR}		{DM, G, NL}								
	{L, UK}										
	{P}										
	{DM, UK}										

Abbreviations:

- B = Belgium
- DM = Denmark
- F = France
- G = Germany
- GR = Greece
- IRL = Ireland
- I = Italy
- L = Luxembourg
- NL = Netherlands
- P = Portugal
- SP = Spain
- UK = United Kingdom

an overview of voting behavior in the period between early December 1993 and late December 1994. In fact, the decision to publish results was only taken at the very end of 1994. The data refer to different compositions of the Council, such as the Council of Agricultural Ministers, the Transportation Council, or the Council of Economic and Financial Affairs (EcoFin Council). As the table demonstrates, weighted voting applies to several policy issues and domains—hence, the relevant issue space is rather likely to be more than uni-dimensional.

Table 1a illustrates which members have either cast a negative vote or abstained with respect to specific issues.¹⁴ In general, voting was on regulations or directives that were to be adopted by the respective composition of the Council. It can be seen that generally, only a few members opposed a specific proposal. Although some members were more often part of an opposing (or “losing”) coalition, such as the United Kingdom, the table illustrates that all EU members have either opposed an issue against a large coalition of other EU members or abstained from voting on at least one issue. For instance, Spain shows a relatively high number of abstentions with respect to fisheries, and both Denmark and Greece have cast quite a few negative votes in various issue areas.

Table 1b shows for each policy area the kind of losing coalitions of EU governments formed.

Some members appear to be in losing coalitions more frequently than others; countries such as Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands seem to coordinate their positions fairly often. But generally there is little indication of clear patterns of coalition formation among selected EU member states,¹⁵ at least for the time period assessed here.

Voting Alliances and Voting Leverage in the Council

With the exception of the European Community’s first expansion in 1973, enlargement did not cause a change in the individual voting weights as attributed to the member states in the Council.¹⁶ Similarly, the requirement to form a qualified majority was always adapted to approximately 71 percent of the total vote. Therefore, in relative terms, the share of individual members in the total vote has decreased with an increase in membership. Similarly, the percentage of votes needed to form a blocking minority has somewhat decreased, from 35.3 in the original constellation of membership to 29.9 percent at present.¹⁷ The following calculations are based on the number of members’ votes throughout the history of the EU. In order to assist these calculations, Table 2 presents an overview of the distribution of votes and the requirement for forming either a qualified majority or a blocking minority for the different constellations of membership in the EU’s past.

The respective changes in voting power for the different stages in the EU’s history, as assessed by the normalized Banzhaf and the Shapley-Shubik power indices, are shown in Table 3.

As measured by these more “conventional” indices of a priori voting power, the relative leverage of countries has decreased with the overall increase in the number of members. In the first constellation of Community membership, the largest members each held almost one-fourth of total voting power (measured by either index). By contrast, in the present situation, their share is only 11.7 percent (Shapley-Shubik index) or 11.2 percent (Banzhaf index). Similarly, the Netherlands started out with a share in voting power of 15 percent (Shapley-Shubik index) or 14.3 percent (Banzhaf index), but its Banzhaf power index dropped to 5.9 percent

TABLE 2. *Distribution of Votes and the Requirement for a Qualified Majority in the Council of the EU.*

Member states	Time period	1958-72	1973-80	1981-85	1986-94	Since 1995
Austria	—	—	—	—	—	4
Belgium	2	5	5	5	5	5
Denmark	—	3	3	3	3	3
Finland	—	—	—	—	—	3
France	4	10	10	10	10	10
Germany	4	10	10	10	10	10
Greece	—	—	—	5	5	5
Ireland	—	3	3	3	3	3
Italy	4	10	10	10	10	10
Luxembourg	1	2	2	2	2	2
Netherlands	2	5	5	5	5	5
Portugal	—	—	—	—	5	5
Spain	—	—	—	—	8	8
Sweden	—	—	—	—	—	4
United Kingdom	—	10	10	10	10	10
Total		17	58	63	76	87
Qualified majority (absolute number of votes and percent of vote total)		12 (70.6%)	41 (70.7%)	45 (71.4%)	54 (71.1%)	62 (71.3%)
Blocking minority (absolute number of votes and percent of vote total)		6 (35.3%)	18 (31.0%)	19 (30.2%)	23 (30.3%)	26 (29.9%)

in the present constellation of members (5.5 percent as measured by the Shapley-Shubik index).

As far as the leverage of coalitions is concerned, it can be seen that France and Germany together held almost half of total voting power in the beginning of the Community's existence, as measured by the sum of their individual indices. But their combined influence has dropped to about one-fourth in the period 1986-94 and presently it is approximately 23 percent. The Benelux countries combined an individual voting power of about 30 percent in the period between 1958 and 1973, but in the present constellation of EU membership, the sum of their individual Shapley-Shubik power indices is only 13.1 percent (or 14.1 percent as measured by the sum of their individual normalized Banzhaf indices).

Table 4 presents the situation in which each alliance—the Benelux countries,¹⁸ the “Paris-Bonn axis”,¹⁹ the “cohesion countries”²⁰ (since 1986) and the “Nordics”²¹ (since 1995)—are assumed to constitute a fixed voting alliance.²² It illustrates that the “Franco-German Alliance,” viewed as an a priori union, has lost relative voting power between the inception of the Community and the present. By contrast, the Benelux members as a “voting bloc” gained with the EU's enlargement by Denmark, Ireland, and the UK in 1973. In contrast to other voting alliances, this group of countries was also able to increase its share in voting power as a bloc in the framework of the most recent enlargement. The “South” and the Franco-German alliance at present hold equal shares in overall voting leverage. The influence of the

TABLE 3. *The Banzhaf and the Shapley-Shubik Power Indices for Qualified Majority Votes in the Council of the EU (in percent).*

(Normalized) Banzhaf Index					
Member states	1958-72	1973-80	1981-85	1986-94	Since 1995
Austria	-	-	-	-	4.8
Belgium	14.3	9.1	8.2	6.7	5.9
Denmark	-	6.6	4.1	4.6	3.6
Finland	-	-	-	-	3.6
France	23.8	16.7	15.8	12.9	11.2
Germany	23.8	16.7	15.8	12.9	11.2
Greece	-	-	8.2	6.7	5.9
Ireland	-	6.6	4.1	4.6	3.6
Italy	23.8	16.7	15.8	12.9	11.2
Luxembourg	0	1.6	4.1	1.8	2.3
Netherlands	14.3	9.1	8.2	6.7	5.9
Portugal	-	-	-	6.7	5.9
Spain	-	-	-	10.9	9.2
Sweden	-	-	-	-	4.8
United Kingdom	-	16.7	15.8	12.9	11.2
Total	100.0	99.8	100.1	100.3	100.3
Shapley-Shubik Index					
Member states	1958-72	1973-80	1981-85	1986-94	Since 1995
Austria	-	-	-	-	4.5
Belgium	15	8.1	7.1	6.4	5.5
Denmark	-	5.7	3.0	4.3	3.5
Finland	-	-	-	-	3.5
France	23.3	17.9	17.4	13.4	11.7
Germany	23.3	17.9	17.4	13.4	11.7
Greece	-	-	7.1	6.4	5.5
Ireland	-	5.7	3.0	4.3	3.5
Italy	23.3	17.9	17.4	13.4	11.7
Luxembourg	0	1.0	3.0	1.2	2.1
Netherlands	15	8.1	7.1	6.4	5.5
Portugal	-	-	-	6.4	5.5
Spain	-	-	-	11.1	9.6
Sweden	-	-	-	-	4.5
United Kingdom	-	17.9	17.4	13.4	11.7
Total	99.9	100.2	99.9	100.1	100.0

"Nordics" as a voting bloc now equals that of the UK or Italy as individual members.

The first constellation of Community members enabled France and Germany to gain a large increase in voting power through the formation of a voting bloc: their collective Shapley-Shubik index was 66.7 percent as compared to 46.7 percent when summed over their individual shares (or 60 percent as contrasted to 47.6 percent when measured by the normalized Banzhaf index). In contrast, building an alliance did not support the relative position of the Benelux countries as a union, measured by either index.

Moreover, one can assume that a particular pattern of coalition formation recurs in several constellations of the Council (although empirical evidence, at least for the early 1990s, does not appear to provide support for this assumption). For instance, a group

TABLE 4. *Voting Power of A Priori Voting Alliances in the Council of the EU.*
(*Banzhaf Index in percent; Shapley-Shubik Index in brackets*)

Coalitions/ Members	Time period	1958-72	1973-80	1981-85	1986-94	Since 1995
BENELUX (Belgium, Luxembourg, Netherlands)		20.0 (16.67)	22.5 (18.33)	21.0 (17.38)	11.9 (11.67)	16.0 (14.52)
"PARIS-BONN AXIS" (Germany and France)		60.0 (66.67)	37.5 (48.33)	33.3 (45.71)	26.2 (26.67)	23.5 (24.52)
"SOUTH" (Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Spain)		-	-	-	26.2 (26.67)	23.5 (24.52)
"NORDICS" (Denmark, Finland, Sweden)		-	-	-	-	11.1 (11.19)
Other members Austria		-	-	-	-	3.7 (2.86)
Denmark		-	2.5 (1.67)	3.7 (2.38)	11.9 (11.67)	-
Greece		-	-	6.2 (4.05)	-	-
Ireland		-	2.5 (1.67)	3.7 (2.38)	-	-
Italy		20.0 (16.67)	17.5 (15.00)	16.0 (14.05)	11.9 (11.67)	11.1 (11.19)
United Kingdom		-	17.5 (15.00)	16.0 (14.05)	11.9 (11.67)	11.1 (11.19)

of countries might be considered to be "laggards" and others "pro-integrationist," as this is often done in the framework of spatial analyses of decision-making as applied to the EU. In an oversimplified example, assume that a policy scale would rank members from "least integrationist" to (most) "integrationist."²³ The UK and Denmark might then, for instance, be viewed as being "least integrationist" (a classification that may hold, for instance, with respect to integration in the field of security, but certainly not in a domain such as market liberalization). Some members, such as France and Germany, would be classed in the center; others, such as Italy and Spain, will be considered "integrationist." Again, this classification would need revision with respect to quite a few aspects, such as in the domain of fisheries in the case of Spain or in some environmental matters in the case of Italy. For the present 15 EU members, a preference distribution can be assumed on a respective policy scale. We will work with such a scale to present some effects in terms of the assessments of relative voting leverage.

For a "left-right" policy-scale UK - DM - S - FI - A - L - NL - B - G - F - Irl - GR - P - I - SP²⁴—and under the assumption that only connected coalitions form²⁵—Table 5 demonstrates the respective assessments for the (modified) normalized Banzhaf power index as compared to the original index. To demonstrate the effects

TABLE 5. *Connected as Compared to Non-connected Coalitions: Adapted Normalized Banzhaf Indices for the Council.*

Type of coalitions	Simple majority rule (44 weighted votes)		Current qualified majority rule (62 weighted votes)	
	Non- connected	Connected	Non- connected	Connected
Austria (A)	4.7	6.6	4.8	8.5
Belgium (B)	5.6	8.2	5.9	8.5
Denmark (DM)	3.3	1.6	3.6	4.3
Finland (FI)	3.3	3.3	3.6	4.3
France (F)	11.7	18.0	11.2	10.6
Germany (G)	11.7	14.8	11.2	8.5
Greece (GR)	5.6	8.2	5.9	8.5
Ireland (Irl)	3.3	6.6	3.6	6.4
Italy (I)	11.7	6.6	11.2	8.5
Luxembourg (L)	2.2	3.3	2.3	2.1
Netherlands (NL)	5.6	8.2	5.9	8.5
Portugal (P)	5.6	6.6	5.9	8.5
Spain (SP)	9.1	3.3	9.2	6.4
Sweden (S)	4.7	3.3	4.8	4.3
United Kingdom (UK)	11.7	1.6	11.2	2.1
Total	99.8	100.2	100.3	100.0

Note: In this rather specific example, the location of members' policy preferences on a uni-dimensional policy scale is assumed to be (from left to right):

UK - DM - S - FI - A - L - NL - B - G - F - Irl - Gr - P - I - SP. Only connected coalitions are taken into consideration and "critical defections" are made on the basis of members' weight, i.e. their number of votes, in the framework of connected coalitions.

more clearly, the simple majority rule (based, however, on weighted votes), and the present qualified majority quota (62 votes) are distinguished.

If only connected coalitions are assumed to form, as assessed on the basis of this specific policy scale and preference distribution among EU governments, voting power tends to shift toward the members located in the center of the scale. However, this effect materializes to a larger extent in the framework of the simple majority rule than for the actual present qualified majority quota. Technically, it is not difficult to assess members' relative voting power on the basis of such more restrictive assumptions. The weak part of such an endeavor is, however, that the location of the policy preferences of the EU governments will not normally follow such clear-cut patterns, but will vary from one policy domain to another. More data to assess EU governments' preferences, more data on actual coalition-formation processes, and more statistical analysis of voting behavior in the Council are needed to guide the analysis toward remaining with the assumption that the coalition formation process among EU governments in the Council essentially follows a random pattern or assumes specific patterns of a priori coalitions.

Qualified Majority Voting and Relative Status Quo Bias

In this section the efficiency and flexibility of some institutional rules of the present EU—and earlier constellations in its membership—will be analyzed and then

extended to study options for a reform of the present system. With respect to decision-making in the Council, the main tool to be applied here is a calculation of the probability that a randomly selected coalition among the EU member states will meet the decision quota (the majority requirement in the Council's voting process). This approach essentially provides figures on the proportion of winning coalitions in all possible coalitions among EU member states.²⁶

The measure provided in this section largely disregards political variables and estimates about the likelihood that specific coalitions will form because of a particular distribution of preferences: these conditions may change in the course of time (for instance, because of shifts in government or changes in the constellation of domestic political parties). Moreover, it is difficult to assess clear patterns of coalition formation on the basis of currently existing empirical evidence, as has been shown above.

Formally, the existence of a winning coalition can be described in the framework of simple games²⁷ (on the following, compare van Deemen, 1989). A simple game is an ordered pair of sets $G=(N,W)$, where N denotes the player set and W is a set of coalitions (or subsets of N). An element of W is called a winning coalition²⁸ (correspondingly, the set of losing coalitions will subsequently be denoted by L). Winning coalitions essentially have the power to control a game and to determine its outcomes.

A weighted majority game is a simple game in which a weight is attributed to each player. A coalition in such a game is winning if the sum of the weights of the players in the coalition exceeds or equals the decision rule (the "quota" of the game). A weighted majority game G is represented by $G = [q; w_1, w_2, \dots, w_n]$, with q denoting the quota and w_i player i 's voting weight. In a weighted majority game, a winning coalition satisfies the condition

$$S \in W \text{ iff } \sum_{i \in S} w_i \geq q \quad (2)$$

Hence, the collective weight of the individual players in a coalition has to equal or exceed the required decision quota (q).

The total number of coalitions (combinations) that can be formed out of n members is 2^n . For instance, in the framework of a three-member voting body, eight coalitions are possible in practice. With the players labeled A , B , and C respectively, the following coalitions can form: $\{A\}$, $\{B\}$, $\{C\}$, $\{A, B\}$, $\{A, C\}$, $\{B, C\}$, the "grand coalition" $\{A, B, C\}$ and the empty set $\{\phi\}$. Depending on the relevant decision rule, however, only some of them are winning.²⁹ Without the empty set, the total of possible coalitions is $2^n - 1$.

For instance, under the unanimity requirement, only the coalition that encompasses all members, the "grand coalition," $\{A, B, C\}$, is winning.³⁰ In the framework of the simple majority rule—here corresponding with the two-thirds majority requirement—the coalitions $\{A, B\}$, $\{A, C\}$, $\{B, C\}$ and $\{A, B, C\}$ are winning.³¹ In the first example, without counting the empty set, the share of winning coalitions in the total is one in seven, resulting in a figure on the committee's relative "capacity to act" of 14.29 percent. In the second case, four out of seven coalitions are winning, generating a figure on the capacity to act of 57.14 percent, indicating a lower barrier to reaching decisions and thus a lower "status quo bias."

The proportion of winning coalitions can be calculated for any voting body and any number of members.³² Note that this procedure not only includes minimum winning coalitions (MWCS), but also takes "oversized coalitions" into account.³³

The EU presently encompasses fifteen member states. As Table 2 illustrates, qualified majority votes generally require 62 votes out of the total of 87 (a share

in the total of 71.3 percent). Moreover, some decisions need, apart from a qualified majority of weighted votes, acceptance by two-thirds of the EU's member states.³⁴ Generally, the Single European Act has increased the areas in which qualified majority votes can be resorted to. Both the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and the recent Amsterdam Treaty have reinforced this trend. Some of the most important areas in which this rule is applied are those linked to the establishment of the internal market and to economic issues more generally.

Since qualified majority votes, as compared to the unanimity rule, increase the Council's "capacity to act" (and hence decrease its relative "status quo bias") there are incentives to resort to qualified majority votes also in those areas that presently require unanimous decisions. This is true, for instance, for the domain of taxation in the framework of the EU's "first pillar" and several areas in the EU's intergovernmentally structured pillars two and three, viz. Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Justice and Home Affairs (JHA).

With respect to the qualified majority decision rule, the 1995 enlargement has basically maintained the required "quota" in terms of the percentage of total votes needed to reach decisions in the Council.³⁵ This suggests that the Council's ability to act remained stable. However, this assumption is misleading, as the subsequent analysis will demonstrate.

The European Parliament, in contrast to the Council, generally decides on the basis of a simple majority of votes cast.³⁶ With respect to selected issue areas, however, a two-thirds majority is required (to be exact, a two-thirds majority of the votes cast, representing a simple majority of the EP's members). This applies, for instance, to a motion of censure on the European Commission and to the acceptance of the EU's draft budget. Up to 1999 the European People's Party (EPP)—the EP's Christian-Democratic Group held a total of 173 seats (or 27.6 percent of EP membership). The largest political group was the European Socialists, with 221 seats (a vote share in the total of 35.3 percent). The third largest group was the Liberals, with a membership of 53 (or 8.5 percent of the total).

The power of the three largest political groups in the EP and of national representations in the framework of the political groups has been analyzed in Peters (1996a). Effects on the leverage of political groups and national representatives with respect to the two main decision rules in the EP are studied, for instance, in Raunio (1996) and Hosli (1997). Generally, the two largest groups are found to have a strong influence on voting outcomes in the EP.

With respect to the flexibility of decision-making or "relative status quo bias," enlargement has not—as measured in purely quantitative terms—affected the EP's relative "capacity to act." This assessment abstracts, of course, from additional organizational challenges when more members join the EP and from effects on the variation of members' preferences. But in quantitative terms, the share of winning coalitions in the total of possible coalitions remains constant as long as the simple majority rule applies. Hence, as a proportion of coalitions in the total, an EP encompassing 100 members has an equal share of winning coalitions as an EP consisting of 700 members. Diverging preferences among the EP's members tend to reduce the EP's overall "capacity to act." Similarly, consistent patterns of coalition-building among political groups—with the exception of an occasional voting alliance between the EPP and the European Socialists, the two large groups that usually meet the decision quota by themselves—tend to reduce the EP's inherent "capacity to act."

How strong is the Council's relative "capacity to act," as assessed by the above approach? Have the number of EU members and the internal decision rules of the

TABLE 6. *The "Flexibility" of Decision-making: The Proportion of Winning Coalitions as Compared to All Possible Coalitions in the Council from 1958 to the Present (in percent).*

Decision rule	1958–72	1973–80	1981–85	1986–94	Since 1995
Number of members	6	9	10	12	15
Total number of possible coalitions (combinations)	63	511	1023	4095	32767
<i>Qualified Majority</i>					
Total number of winning coalitions	14	75	140	402	2549
Share of winning coalitions in all possible coalitions (in percent)	22.22	14.68	13.69	9.82	7.78
<i>Unanimity</i>					
Total number of winning coalitions	1	1	1	1	1
Share of winning coalitions in all possible coalitions (in percent)	1.5873	0.1957	0.0978	0.0244	0.0031

Council had an effect on this institution's "relative status quo bias"³⁷ Table 6 presents an overview of the proportion of winning coalitions that could have been formed among the members when qualified majority votes applied in the EU's history.³⁸ In order to allow for comparison, it also lists the respective number of winning coalitions under the unanimity rule.

Increased membership is likely to have affected the inherent degree of "status quo bias" under the unanimity rule—as it applied with respect to decisions taken either on the basis of the "Luxembourg compromise" or decisions that required unanimity by the Treaty of Rome, such as taxation and the protection of workers' rights. Expansion of the EU's membership, hence, generally resulted in detrimental effects on the Council's overall "capacity to act" under this requirement. More generally, under the formal rule of unanimity, one in 63 coalitions (or 1.59 percent) are winning in the framework of a six-member committee, whereas this proportion decreases to one in 32 767 (or 0.0031 percent) in an institution encompassing 15 members.

How has the degree of relative "status quo bias," in comparison, changed in the framework of the Council's qualified majority rule? Since the proportion of weighted votes was adapted, with every enlargement, to approximately 71 percent of the weighted vote total (Table 2), it seems that the inherent "status quo bias"—measured as the share of winning coalitions in all possible coalitions among members—should have remained constant over time. However, this intuition is found to be misleading, as Table 6 illustrates. The historical overview indicates that a rather significant decrease in institutional flexibility has occurred between 1958 and the present. Whereas the share of winning coalitions in the total that could be formed among Community members was more than one in five (or 22.22 percent) in the first phase of the Community's existence, this ratio decreased to 14.68

percent with the first enlargement and has declined ever since: between 1981 and 1985, the share was 13.69 percent, subsequently dropping to 9.82 percent (1986–94). In the present constellation of EU membership, the ratio of winning coalitions to all coalitions that can be formed among the 15 member states under the qualified majority rule is merely 7.78 percent. Again, this trend can be expected to continue with further enlargement.

Hence, resorting to more qualified majority votes in the framework of the 1987 Single European Act (SEA) has facilitated decision-making to some extent, as analyzed in purely quantitative terms with respect to qualified majority votes in the Council. This change, however, was partially counterbalanced by the loss in flexibility that accompanied the increase in the Community's membership.³⁹

How would have the Council's capacity to act been affected had the option favored by the United Kingdom and Spain in the negotiations on the 1995 enlargement been pursued for the present qualified majority threshold in the Council? As mentioned above, these two members favored the maintenance of a 23-vote requirement to form a blocking minority in the framework of the present constellation of EU membership. This "quota" in fact is relevant, as mentioned above, when the "Ioannina Compromise" applies. The analysis as applied to this scenario shows that "flexibility" decreases, compared to the situation in 1986–94, not only from 9.81 to 7.78 percent, but further to 4.71 percent. Hence, whereas the Ioannina Compromise certainly increased the leverage of individual EU members to participate in "blocking coalitions," it further decreased the Council's overall "ability to act."

Enlargement by several new members will cause a further increase in the Council's inherent degree of "status quo bias" under the qualified majority rule. This trend may be counteracted by possible simplifications of the decision-making procedures or changes in the EU's inter-institutional balance of influence. Although most EU governments are opposed to this option at present, a decrease in the decision "quota" could keep the Council's current "status quo bias" stable with enhanced membership: if the quota as a percentage of the vote total is not adapted in an enlarged EU, decision-making in the Council is likely to be more cumbersome in the future.

Conclusion

Reform of the EU's institutions is crucial. Several issues are at stake. This article focuses on the Council of the EU, by studying repercussions of voting weights and the decision quota on the distribution of power among the members, and effects on the Council's overall "capacity to act" in view of enlargement.

The article began by illustrating a possible extension of "voting power analysis" on the basis of the assumption that some members are more likely to form coalitions, providing results of the analysis of specific "a priori unions" within the EU. Moreover, consideration of "connected coalitions" only—of members adjacent as assessed on a uni-dimensional policy scale—tends to attribute more voting power to center players, although more so under the simple majority rule than under the actual qualified majority quota. (A challenge to restraining the analysis to such a scale, however, consists in correctly assessing the location of members' preferences in the Council with respect to several issue areas, and there are some doubts on whether the threat of a "critical defection" could be credible in this context.)

On the basis of first empirical data, it is shown that clear patterns of coalition formation appear to be absent in the framework of voting procedures in the Council.

Some countries may be more inclined to cast negative votes in different cases or to cooperate occasionally, but in the aggregate, summing over the votes in meetings of different constellations of the Council—such as the Council of Agricultural Ministers, the Ministers of Economics and Finance (EcoFin Council), the Ministers of Trade or of the Environment—the high dimensionality of the policy space facing EU governments leads to several coalitions among EU members being possible in practice. Trends for cooperation among some members may nonetheless exist, but with increased membership, even more partners will be available for the potential coalition-formation processes.

How has the Council's relative "status quo bias," more generally, been affected by enlargement? This article illustrates that the relatively high decision "quota" has decreased the Council's "capacity to act" over time, not only under the unanimity rule, but also in the framework of the qualified majority requirement. Hence, enlargement is likely to enhance the Council's relative "status quo bias" under the current qualified majority voting quota. Only a lowering of the present quota—although an unpopular suggestion among the EU's governments—would counteract this trend.

Notes

1. This is suggested, for instance, in Garrett and Tsebelis (1996).
2. See Shapley and Shubik (1954) and Banzhaf (1965). Both the Banzhaf and the Shapley-Shubik indices are measures based on the concept of a member's "pivotalness." They essentially calculate the proportion of cases in which a committee member can cast a pivotal vote, i.e., turn a voting coalition from a losing into a winning one, and vice versa. Generally, in the framework of cooperative n -person games, power indices provide a measure of the expectation of payoff distributions among the players.
3. To be exact, the Shapley-Shubik index considers coalitions of equal size to be equiprobable.
4. On procedures to calculate the indices under the assumption of a priori unions, see Owen (1977) for the Shapley-Shubik index and Owen (1982) for the Banzhaf power index.
5. Compare Hosli (1996).
6. For a contrary assessment, see Garrett and Tsebelis (1996).
7. In addition, in terms of calculations, there are two main possibilities to assess members' a priori voting power for such an adapted index: (1) Only connected coalitions are assumed to form, and members within such coalitions can make critical defections on the basis of their relative weight; (2) an additional criterion for a critical defection may consist in a member's threat of rendering the coalition non-connected. In the latter case, it might be small members making this critical defection, due to their location in the center of the relevant policy scale. By contrast, under the first approach, more voting power is attributed to the larger members. In the framework of the second approach, moreover, voting power analysis could take the possibility into account that some members might make "double critical defections"—on the basis of both spatial location and relative weight—which might be corrected for in the calculation of an overall index. On "double pivotal votes" see, for instance, Hosli (1995).
8. On the following, compare Hosli (1996).
9. On the increasing importance of lobbying groups in the European Union see Julien (1990), Andersen and Eliassen (1991), Streeck and Schmitter (1991), or Mazey and Richardson (1993).
10. For an (early) assessment of intergovernmental negotiations in the Community, see Wallace (1985).
11. A distinction is made between "A-points" and "B-points." On the tasks and the functions of the COREPER see, for instance, Hayes-Renshaw, Lequèsne, and Mayor Lopez (1989).

12. The principle of extension of present voting weights has met the opposition of the UK and Spain in the framework of the 1995 enlargement. The solution finally resorted to—the “Ioannina compromise”—implies that members combining at least 23 votes in the Council may demand further negotiations on an issue if they do not agree with the decision as taken on the basis of the (adapted) qualified majority rule. In the period between 1986 and 1994, 23 votes were required to form a blocking minority. In the case of the UK, a decrease in sovereignty is likely to have been the most crucial reason for its reluctance to agree to an adaptation of the “quota” to reach a blocking minority. For Spain, the most probable explanation is that changing the requirement to form a blocking minority would have altered the balance between the “North” and the “South” in the EU.
13. These assessments refer to the case in which decisions are taken in accordance with the simpler procedural options within the rather tedious overall procedures. That is—in the framework of the cooperation procedure—when the European Parliament has not rejected a Commission proposal and when the Council does not amend a revised Commission proposal (these situations, by contrast, would require unanimity in the Council). In the framework of the co-decision procedure, as introduced by the Treaty on European Union, the Council can only decide by qualified majority vote when its common position does not differ from the Commission’s initial proposal and when the Commission has not delivered a negative opinion on an amendment as proposed by the European Parliament.
14. These data are based on the period prior to the 1995 enlargement, when the total number of EU members listed was 12.
15. However, note that Table 1 cannot provide information on members’ actual policy preferences, apart from the extreme cases in which they either vote in favor of a proposal, abstain, or cast a negative vote.
16. This section partially draws on Hosli (1996).
17. If a qualified majority is defined to be 71 percent of the vote total, this figure approximates—but never reaches—29 percent. On the importance of members’ ability to join blocking minorities see Johnston (1995a,b).
18. On developments and cooperation in the framework of the Benelux, see for instance Pijpers and Vanhoonacker (1997).
19. See Szukala and Wessels (1997).
20. The expression refers to the group of countries that advocated extensive financial North–South transfers in the framework of the negotiations on the Maastricht Treaty. On cooperation in the framework of the “South,” see also Tsakaloyannis (1997).
21. Compare Widgrén (1993) or Petersen (1997).
22. On this analysis, compare Hosli (1996).
23. Compare Garrett and Tsebelis (1996).
24. For the abbreviations used for the countries, see Table 1b.
25. “Critical defections” are here only considered on the basis of weight in the framework of connected coalitions, as described above.
26. On this approach, compare Buchanan and Tullock (1962), Kilgour and Levesque (1984), Peters (1996b) and König and Bräuninger (1997).
27. These definitions go back to the seminal work of Von Neumann and Morgenstern (1947).
28. The following axioms apply with respect to winning coalitions: (1) any coalition that contains a winning subcoalition is itself winning; formally, if $S \in W$ and $S \subseteq T$, then $T \in W$ (monotonicity requirement); (2) there are winning coalitions: $W \neq \emptyset$; (3) the empty coalition is not winning ($\emptyset \notin W$). Axioms (2) and (3) ensure that trivial games are excluded. Compare van Deemen (1997). On simple games and legislatures see, for instance, Rapoport (1970: 207–221).
29. According to axiom (3) with regard to winning coalitions, moreover, the empty coalition can never be winning.
30. The weighted majority game, in this case, is [3; 1,1,1].
31. In this example, the weighted majority game is given by [2; 1,1,1].

32. A related concept to the analysis conducted here is König and Bräuninger's (1997) "inclusiveness index." However, the focus of the present article is not so much on the individual ("In how many coalitions is a player included?" as compared to "How decisive is the player?") but on the system as a whole, asking "How 'flexible' is it?". König and Bräuninger, however, also provide figures on the "procedural decision probability." These figures, for the cases available, generally correspond with the ones provided here.
33. For the assumption that larger than minimum winning coalitions form in the framework of EU decision making, see for instance Budden and Monroe (1993).
34. On the different decision rules that presently exist in the Council and repercussions in terms of the flexibility of decision-making, see Peters (1996b).
35. For an analysis of how these quotas affect the capacity of members to participate in "blocking minorities," see Johnston (1995a,b).
36. See Article 141 of the Treaty establishing the European Community. However, some other decisions require a (simple) majority of the EP members. This procedure, for instance, applies with respect to the (indirect) right of initiative that the EP has obtained by the Maastricht Treaty: "The European Parliament may, acting by a majority of its Members, request the Commission to submit any appropriate proposal on matters on which it considers that a Community act is required for the purpose of implementing this Treaty" (Article 138b). Similarly, in the framework of the cooperation procedure, the EP may, by an absolute (simple) majority of its component members, propose amendments to the Council's "common position" or reject it.
37. This topic is also analyzed in Hosli (1998).
38. Note, however, that the use of qualified majority votes was limited in practice due to the Luxembourg compromise. This compromise was resorted to in the 1960s after the French "policy of the empty chair" (basically a strategy of "exit threat" conducted by one of the EC's most powerful members). The compromise led to the requirement of unanimity whenever a member state's "crucial national interests" were at stake.
39. Note that specific decisions in the Council require both a qualified majority of weighted votes and agreement by two-thirds of EU membership (at present, 10 out of the total of 15 members). This second requirement has tended to decrease institutional flexibility when it was applicable.

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