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# Going Mobile: Political Careers and Institutional Power in the European Commission

**Zachary Arace**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The European Commission is arguably the most powerful component of today's European Union, yet little is understood about who actually comprises the Commission and how they get to Brussels. Scholars have thus far focused on piecemeal studies of backgrounds of Commissioners, legislative approaches to Commission recruitment, or spatial models of multilevel governance systems (among others). In contrast, this paper takes a comprehensive approach to understanding paths to the Commission. To support this approach, a large-N data set of both institutional and personal (i.e., biographies and career histories) data of all Commissioners appointed since 2010 is constructed. This data set is then used to analyze three hypotheses relating political, socioeconomic, and personal variables at the Commissioner and national level—attempting to answer the question, “Which type of Commissioner is likely to be appointed from X country?” All in all, this paper hopes to illuminate underlying, broad-level trends in Commissioner appointments and spur further quantitative—and predictive—research on paths to the Commission. Who serves in the Commission impacts not only Brussels, but the entire European Union.

## **KEYWORDS**

European Commission, Political Careers, Political Recruitment, Governance

## INTRODUCTION

The European Commission is at the heart of European union. The Commission serves as the European Union's executive branch of government, holding important powers, including legislative initiation, enforcement of European Union laws and policies, and even the mystical role of "Guardian of the Treaties" of European union. 28 European Commissioners sit atop this pillar of Brussels—but they are appointed by member states in a relatively opaque process shielded from any direct electoral competition. As Schmidt (2000) and others have demonstrated, the so-called Eurocrats running the Commission (the Commissioners themselves) are more than just figureheads: they control the largest executive branch of government in Europe. Who are these Eurocrats? Are they a cadre of national elites, or does appointment to the Commission vary on a national level? How does this appointment process work?

As the European Union has expanded eastward since the fall of the Berlin Wall, states joining the Union in recent years hail from a decidedly different socioeconomic background. In terms of Commission appointments, variations in appointment processes or trends between more-influential, older member states and less-influential, newer member states (the majority of which are former Soviet republics) of the Union may exist. Moreover, the pace of recruitment to the Commission impacts countries with smaller, less-developed political recruitment supply pools more acutely than ones with larger, more-developed pools. In essence, does the Commission "capture" national politicians and keep them in Brussels for multiple terms, or is appointment to a Commission seat more fluid? And is there any difference between less- and more-influential member states?

Given these questions, this paper will explore the importance of the various factors affecting Commission appointments, including personal<sup>1</sup> backgrounds, career histories, country influence, and political climates within individual member states. The goal: to build an empirical base upon existing models in the literature that provides a broad overview of appointments to the current Commission, in order to explain any social, partisan, or career variations along any given dimension (if any variations exist). In essence, this paper will test the conventional theories of the European Commission's place in the institutional hierarchy of supranational Europe.

In exploring each of these questions and dimensions, this paper hypothesizes that appointment to the Commission does, in fact, vary by national influence; that political party has a strong relationship with appointment to the Commission, at least on the national level; and that the Commission is, indeed, a low-churn, high-incumbency office. Taken collectively, this paper offers a more comprehensive assessment of appointment to the European Commission—a process that has important implications for both national governments and the Commission itself.

## SURVEYING THE FIELD: COMMON THEMES, DISJOINED CONCLUSIONS

Several lines of scholarship are pertinent to this paper's discussion of European Commission recruitment. One addresses legislative recruitment: the drivers behind, and the theoretical frameworks organizing, political careers in traditional parliamentary systems. Another emphasizes personal-career variables, such as prior offices held and general "expertise" of commissioners. Yet another considers perceived institutional power gaps in the supranational-national space as a possible explanation. While all contributions are invaluable

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1 Including socioeconomic background, education, occupation, and prior political offices held.

able foundational pillars, none of the models—and little of the literature at large—robustly explains political recruitment in the European Commission.

### ***Traditional Legislative Recruitment Approaches***

Perhaps the most common lens through which to view political recruitment is the significant body of literature on parliamentary careers. This classic mode emphasizes a hybrid of institutional and strategic models for explaining recruitment within political systems, and poses a number of theories. Above all else, this literature serves as a cornerstone for further analysis of political recruitment within supranational systems. The legislative model, in other words, informs basic arguments about the European Commission's supply of appointment candidates and the mechanisms by which they are vetted and selected through the appointment process.

Legislative recruitment and, in a broader sense, passages to power, is often explained using four main factors: the actual supply of candidates; the demands of the electorate, or those who vet and choose from the “pool of aspirants” (Norris 1997, p. 5); actual recruitment processes; and the broader political system. On these first two points, the literature has historically focused on the role of political parties in marketing candidates based on ideology—“what members [of legislatures] stood for,” in other words (Norris 1997, p. 6)—as the chief means by which the electorate evaluated them. Similarly, another sub-stream of recruitment literature saw the composition of political elites as a stable predictor of recruitment (Norris 1997, p. 6). Among others, Wessels (in one study) and Esaiasson and Holmberg (in another) “have demonstrated that the social background of legislators may matter not just for the symbolic legitimacy of elected bodies, but also for the attitudes and behavior of representatives” (Norris 1997, p. 6). Gender has also been shown to play a role in “attitudinal” differences in parliamentary parties, and can affect the “style” and substance of politics in parliaments (Norris 1997, pp. 6–7). These studies, however, are somewhat incompatible with the European Commission appointment process: national governments, not political parties, propose candidates for Commission appointment.

Fischer and Stolz (2011) provided a more structural approach to legislative recruitment in their work on “level-jumping,” or the movement of politicians across gradients in multilevel governance structures. Fischer and Stolz's study of Germany, a country that divides power between a federal legislature and executive and 16 state governments (*Länder*), posits several models as to if, how, and why politicians transition between different levels of government. In the so-called springboard model, politicians move in a centripetal direction up to the national level (here considered the “apex” of political careers) (Fischer & Stolz, 2011, p. 4). This stands in contrast to the alternative careers model, which sees politicians remaining fixed in mutually-exclusive territorial units—i.e., *Land* parliamentarians never leave the *Länder* and national politicians never leave the Bundestag (Fischer & Stolz, 2011, p. 4). Finally, the integrated model envisions moving, more or less, freely between territorial levels (Fischer & Stolz, 2011, p. 5). While innovative and useful for conceptualizing a multi-level space for political career trajectories, Fischer and Stolz do not make any claims about the prevalent direction of movement or the characteristics of politicians who move within the system—and do not address the supranational European Union (Fischer & Stolz, 2011).

In general, there are several flaws to the legislative model as applied to the European Commission. For one, parliaments are inherently national-level institutions; they face structural, political, and institutional contours and constraints that are either absent from or dif-

ferent at the supranational level. For another, in most democracies, citizens directly elect legislators—who then form a cabinet. European Commissioners, however, are appointed by the member states, vetted by the European Council, and approved by the European Parliament. While the argument can be made that voters have at least an indirect say<sup>2</sup> in who is appointed to the Commission, the fact remains: there is no direct, electoral link between European voters and their Commissioners<sup>3</sup>. As explained in previous sections, the European Commission is appointed by all of the member states; thus, it can be assumed that Commissioners are not subject to the same electoral pressures that are present in “normal” elections—like those to the European Parliament, for example, or to most national offices in typical European Westminster or presidential systems. Voters, in other words, are not gatekeepers to the Commission. It is at this point that legislative recruitment models and the European Commission appointment process diverge.

### ***Studies of Personal Histories***

Another vein of political career research, especially that dealing with the European Commission, emphasizes the importance of common trends in the personal background and career history of politicians who “make it” to the Commission. Personal historians paint recruitment in sociological terms: the Commission attracts a certain type of politician—ones from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, ones who share similar career histories, or even ones who share roughly equivalent political preferences not only of the member state governments, but also of the Commission itself.

MacMullen (2001), in a historical study of the composition of the Commission, argues that despite some major differences due to “national peculiarities,” Commissioners can be “fitted into broad gender, age, educational, occupational, and political categories” (p. 48). Further, “the majority” of Commissioners have been male, university-educated, politically centrist, have most often served in national government—“a national political career at the parliamentary and ministerial level is becoming almost the norm”—and usually possess “active experience in European and international organizations” (MacMullen, 2001, p. 49). MacMullen (2001) concludes that, as the Commission has evolved on the European stage, “the political nature and significance of the Commission role has been recognized” and “the role of European Commissioner frequently appears as a logical progression” along modern career trajectories of European politicians (p. 50).

While an important foundation, MacMullen’s work is somewhat limited, for several reasons. For one, MacMullen’s work is over a decade old (published in an edited volume on the European Commission in 2001) and thus omits four later Commissions from analysis. This obsolescence is glaring considering the European Union’s “Big Bang” enlargement in 2004, which, among other developments, brought many former Eastern Bloc countries into the fold of the Union and increased the number of Commission seats by 20 % (from 20 to 25). Additionally, MacMullen does not attempt to build a larger framework or model from his data—and does not take any institutional factors into account in his analysis of the data.

In a similar vein, Georgakakis’s (2012) historical study of the College of Commission-

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2 Voters throughout Europe elect the European Parliament every five years. They also elect their national governments (to some extent, varying by country). Thus, theoretically, there are two indirect avenues to democratically contest European Commission appointments.

3 This disconnection is the basis of the oft-maligned “democratic deficit” in the Commission—a topic of substantial debate among not only contemporary European Union scholars, but EU policymakers themselves.

ers up to Santer (spanning 1958–1999) attempts to provide a more robust statistical analysis to explain the significance of different personal background and career history variables. Among other variables, Georgakakis (2012) calculates and analyzes the statistical significance of occupations (significantly, both before and after Commission posts), length of mandates, nationality, and European experience (whether or not the Commissioner had served in the European Parliament, for example). Georgakakis (2012) concludes that the “classical conception” of the Commission as either a realm for former ministers or skilled technocrats is not true, and that a seat on the Commission has evolved into a “social position” tied not only to the European Union in a broad sense, but also the other European institutions (p. 72). Again, though, Georgakakis’s (2012) work suffers from the same flaws as MacMullen: his analysis does not capture the Commissions of the past decade<sup>4</sup>—leading to significant gaps in explanatory power—and his focus on the “organic sociology” of the Commission, while fascinating, does not provide a robust, workable explanation of Commission appointments.

With respect to these explanations of Commission composition and recruitment, this paper seeks not only to fill in empirical gaps left by old data, but also to build a more comprehensive model of Commission appointments—one that takes institutional variables into account and can be predictive, rather than solely explanatory. In other words, while the personal history mode of analysis can highlight shared traits of who make it to the Commission, it does not consider the empirical basis for these commonalities.

### ***Institutional Power-based Explanations***

Institutional power, in the context of this paper, has two meanings: attractiveness of the EU vice national office, and balance-of-power considerations between competing institutions at the supranational level. One implicitly emphasizes motivations of appointees themselves, while the other points to more micro-level strategic action (bargaining, almost) on the part of the appointers (initially, member state governments).

Through this lens, European Commission appointments are subject to a multi-player game at the European level (between member states at Council; between Council, Commission, and Parliament for final approval). Member states must balance own self-interest and likelihood of approval of their candidate by other players<sup>5</sup> in choosing whom to appoint. Appointment to the Commission, according to the institutional power view, thus requires a certain strategic pragmatism on the part of national governments: Will a given Commissioner hold the interests of Europe or the interest of his nation (and, by extension, his national government) closer to his heart? Stevens and Stevens (2001), along these lines, argue that, throughout the course of history, Commissioners have strayed from Schuman and Monet’s oath of “Europe above all”<sup>6</sup> towards a more politically-motivated state of operation. The Commission as a whole (including staff), they note, has “sacrificed” the

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4 While Georgakakis does discuss current President of the Commission Jose Manuel Barroso, his analysis does not capture much beyond a micro-level examination of Barroso’s personal, educational, and occupational history and European-level experience.

5 Again, as detailed in prior sections, the Commission President, other European Union member states, and the European Parliament may all oppose (both formally and informally) appointment candidates at various stages in the process.

6 As required by treaty, new Commissioners must swear an oath to serve Europe and the European Union above their respective national interests.

“primacy of the merit principle” in staff recruitment, especially with the addition of new member states in the mid-1990s (Stevens & Stevens, 2001, p. 95).

Holger Doring (2007) takes a slightly different approach, arguing that the intellectual and occupational “caliber” of Commission appointees varies by member state, for a number of reasons. In a multivariate analysis of European Commissioners since 1958, Doring (2007) finds that party affiliation is a strong link, but (since 2004) more of a by-product of squeezed portfolios (p. 207). Additionally, Doring (2007) does find a “substantial” difference in appointment patterns between larger and smaller member states (p. 209). Like Wonka (2004), Doring frames his argument in terms of institutional power and principal-agent theory, but goes further in attempting to provide a “systemic account” of the variations in Commission appointments by member state, as well as capturing the “political importance” of different Commissioners at the national level, thereby communicating their relative stature and value (pp. 208-209). Doring (2007) goes as far as to emphasize the role of “domestic factors” acting within a national dimension of a principal-agent relationship—but does not attempt to capture any empirical evidence of such a pattern (p. 225). Moreover, Doring (2007) does not build on his principal-agent characterization at the supranational level—losing a layer of explanatory power. Doring’s capture of “patterns of Commission appointment” (p. 225), including variation between small and large member states and also variation among large member states, is a valuable empirical foundation for this paper’s analysis (and, indeed, addresses some of this paper’s hypotheses almost word-for-word), but, again, lacks a comprehensive, all-inclusive framework for explaining Commission appointments.

### ***Summary: A Dual Approach, Building on Doring***

This paper intends to build a more comprehensive model of European Commission appointment, encompassing elements of all three approaches to political recruitment: legislative supply and demand, personal histories, and institutional power gaps. Most directly, this paper will build on Doring’s work on dichotomous patterns in European Commission appointment—testing not caliber of position, but country influence. This paper will also apply Doring’s framework to the Commission itself, examining the tendency of the Commission to “capture” national politicians in an incumbent system. Both lines of investigation will enable a better understanding of European Commission appointment, composition, and effects on political recruitment pools at national and European levels.

### **INVESTIGATIVE METHODOLOGY**

This project focused on a more comprehensive conception of European Commission appointments through more specific modes of inquiry and utilizing a mixture of scholarly techniques and models of Commission appointment (including those listed above) to analyze data on the personal, institutional, and national levels. The broad goal: a synthesis of the contemporary literature and new empirical data (collected herein) to analyze Commission appointments across various levels of investigation.

### ***Hypotheses and Associated Logic***

Employing several different lines of analysis and theoretical approaches to Commission appointment, this project tests the following hypotheses (See Table 5 for a summary):

*H<sub>R</sub> 1: The less influential the country, the more likely their appointee to the Commission will have a technical or diplomatic background.* “Technically-competent” means a politician whose

background consists either of diplomatic service (under the auspices of national government) or of European Union experience. The logic is straightforward: less-influential countries have more at stake at the European Union level—and more tangible benefits to gain from the Union—than more-influential countries. Additionally, less-influential member states are often not as experienced as more-influential member states at interfacing with the European Union—simply because most of the newer European Union members are also some of the least influential nations in Europe.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, an empirical dataset itself captures accession date as a direct metric (See the discussion of the Political-Institutional dataset for additional information). Thus, because less-influential member states have both more at stake and less experience at the European Union level, they will strategically appoint Commissioners who are diplomatically savvy and technically skilled, rather than more self-interested<sup>8</sup>, diplomatically un-savvy politicians.

*H<sub>R</sub>2: The more power a given political party has in a given national parliament and national cabinet, the more likely that party is to appoint cabinet ministers from the same party.* Perhaps more simple truism than empirical position, this hypothesis is nevertheless important: will national governments reach beyond party and patronage to appoint the most competent candidates to the Commission (as they are required to do by treaty), or will they stick to more traditional appointment criteria and candidate filtering familiar to legislative recruitment and party politics?<sup>9</sup> This paper, like Doring, posits that, at least in the context of national parties, traditional processes of political recruitment and advancement of individual politicians will hold: parties will seek to translate their electoral strength at home—and especially in the cabinet—to the European Commission.

*H<sub>R</sub>3: Politicians appointed to the European Commission will remain in the Commission.* While this paper only collected data on the current European Commission, this hypothesis remains important, and the prediction valid. The logic behind it is sound: given that the European Commission is usually perceived as the apex of the supranational political system in Europe (see discussion earlier in this paper), politicians—regardless of country of origin—are likely to remain at the Commission through each successive five-year appointment cycle. Here, the logic is dual-fold. Commissioners from less-influential countries may perceive greater power—and greater benefits<sup>10</sup>—from a seat on the Commission versus a seat in national government. Those from more-influential countries, on the other hand, may perceive a more beneficial environment—either in terms of tangible benefits noted in Footnote 10 or

7 The Influence Index, a metric used in two empirical datasets developed for this paper, captures European Union accession date as an indirect statistic in calculating country influence; see later pages for a more complete description.

8 All politicians are self-interested. However, in this present context, “self-interested” is taken to mean a clearly-evidenced interest (empirically) in party and political career advancement, rather than national service or technical background. See later pages for an empirical discussion.

9 Loosely, such partisan theories of recruitment and political careers variously hold that institutional constraints, personal backgrounds (especially gender), and/or political party variables and processes effectively control career advancement in political systems—and not pure competence, all other things equal. See Beckwith et al (citation provided in References) for a cogent summary of these theories and a critical discussion.

10 Such “benefits” span a wide spectrum of perks inherent in almost any political office, and include patronage, prestige, and policy purview (portfolio). For instance, Commissioners control a vast European bureaucracy (patronage); often undertake foreign travel and meet with European and global dignitaries on issues of importance to their office (prestige); and, as noted earlier in this paper, have significant power over the European Union as a whole. Such a combination often holds allure for national politicians—especially those from less-influential, less-powerful countries.

in terms of a less-competitive (read: non-competitive) electoral environment—at the Commission level than conditions at the national level. Both, however, are based on an institutional power model of the European Union (see earlier pages in this paper for a discussion).

*Table 1: Hypotheses Summary and Relevant Details*

Hypothesis	Level of Analysis	Corollaries (if any)	Logic/Theory
Less influential the country, more technically-competent appointee	Country size, Commissioner biography	More influential the country, less-experienced the politician	Less-influential countries have most to gain from EU
More power a given political party has in national government, more likely to nominate one from same party	National political climate (distribution of seats in Parliament and cabinet), Commissioner party		Parties maximize control of government at all levels
Commissioners will stay in the Commission once appointed	Commissioner biography (prior offices held)	Commissioners will become entrenched incumbents	Benefits of Commission office outweigh national office; “pro-Europe” socialization

## RESEARCH DESIGN

This project’s main empirical contribution is a collection and codification of two large-N datasets containing data on various facets of the current College of Commissioners (including Commissioners whose term ended earlier than their mandate—in this case, only one<sup>11</sup>). A metric used in both of these datasets (Country Influence) was also developed organically during the course of, and for the purposes of, this project. As noted above, collection of these data facilitated the testing of three hypotheses and provided insight into additional trends not necessarily captured by one of the four formal hypotheses. This paper concentrates first and foremost on hypothesis testing, and then moves to highlight any additional substantial and relevant trends.

The first dataset, called Political-Institutional, includes data on national and European Commission institutional variables, and is organized by individual Commissioner. There are 29 main units of data (Commissioners) and 17 variables. This dataset aggregates institutional constraints and non-biographical trends in Commission appointments across the current College. Major variables include the following:

- Date of EU Accession
- Country Influence Ranking (again, using the Influence Index)
- European and national party membership
- Absolute and relative results of most recently-relevant<sup>12</sup> national Parliament and cabinet elections

11 Scandal-ridden Maltese Commissioner John Dalli, appointed in 2010, was forced to resign in 2012.

12 For lack of a more cogent phrase to describe this variable: Because European Commission appointments are staggered across various national election cycles for individual member states, this dataset identified the last election prior to the 2010 Commission appointment cycle in each member state, as national politicians elected during these individual cycles eventually decided Commission appointments.

- Corollary coding of cabinet strength (e.g., whether the party had a majority in the cabinet and whether or not the party held the head of government position)
- Corollary coding of whether the party in national government was the same as the party of that country’s Commission appointee (regardless of affiliation—or lack of—in a political party at the national level<sup>13</sup>)—this dataset’s most empirically-relevant variable.

The Index of Influence is one of the hallmarks of this dataset, and of this project as a whole. Originally developed in Arace (2012) and updated for this project, the Index attempts to provide a measure of relative country influence (on a four-point scale), using a plethora of relevant statistics, for each member state in the European Union. Statistics driving the influence ranking for each country include both hard measures (GDP, income per capita, land area, and population) and soft measures (EU accession date, Eurozone membership, NATO membership, and European Parliament seats). The Index is a novel, effective way to measure member state influence—and thus provides a basis upon which to explore variations in Commission appointment based on member state influence.

The second dataset, Political-Personal, collected biographical and career history data for all Commissioners since 2010. Like Political-Institutional, Political-Personal is organized by Commissioner—the unit of analysis. Again, 17 variables were measured for 29 Commissioners, totaling 493 individual data points. Key variables in this dataset include:

- Age
- Education
- Professional Occupation (prior to politics)
- Country Influence
- Prior offices held at the European Commission and in the European Union at large (including Parliament), if any
- The last two offices held at the national level, regardless of chronology or overlap with European office
- A derived summary of each politician’s “path” to the Commission, given prior offices held.

These data give a complimentary picture to those gathered in Political-Institutional, highlighting commonalities across the current College of personal traits and political career paths. This dataset thus provides both a mix of institutional constraints and sociological data, and provides a picture of the contemporary College of Commissioners.

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13 This refers most directly to those Commissioners who are independents (i.e., not registered members of a political party) in their respective country.

Table 2: Hypothesis-Dataset Map

Hypothesis	Corresponding Dataset(s)	Corresponding Variables
1. State influence and Commissioner experience	Political-Personal	Country Influence, Nationality, Previous Commission Portfolio, Previous European Office, Previous National Offices
2. Partisan appointment processes/national level	Political-Institutional	Party in Government? (coded compilation), Same/Different than Commissioner's Party? (coded compilation)
3. Commission capture	Political-Personal	Previous Commission Portfolio, Previous European Office

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Major Findings

*Hypothesis 1 (The less influential the country, the more likely their appointee to the Commission will have a technical or diplomatic background): Evidence is suggestive and supportive.* Indeed, less-influential member states appointed Commissioners who either possessed significant European Union experience or had a background in national diplomatic corps or technical civil service—or both. As summarized in Table 3, out of the 17 European Union member states that are less influential than the average European Union member state<sup>14</sup>, 9 member states (53 %) appointed Commissioners who had previously held political office in the European Union—including European Parliament seats and prior European Commission appointments. Additionally, of the six less-influential member states who did not appoint Commissioners with direct European Union experience, half (50 %) of them appointed technocrats (defined here as politicians holding non-elected, technically-demanding positions in civil service) or former Foreign Service officers. Thus, 82 % of less-influential member state appointees to the Commission had some degree of prior experience with the European Union or diplomacy in general—either direct (European Union-level office) or indirect (European Union-related or foreign affairs-related office in national government).

14 That is, countries who scored above a 2 out of 4 in composite Country Influence.

Table 3: Results of Testing Hypothesis 1

Of the 17 European Union member states less influential than the average...	...9 member states appointed Commissioners who had previously held European office	...53% appointed Commissioners who had previously held European office
Of the 6 less-influential member states who did not fit the above criteria...	...3 member states appointed Commissioners who had some indirect Europe experience	...50% appointed Commissioners who had some indirect Europe experience
<b>In sum,</b>	<i>12 out of 17 less-influential member states appointed Commissioners with some sort of Europe experience</i>	<i>82% of less-influential member states appointed Commissioners with some sort of Europe experience</i>

On the other hand, more-influential member states also appointed Commissioners with European Union experience—but the relationship is weaker. Of the 12 member states that were more influential than the average European country, three-fourths (9 countries; 75 % of more-influential countries) of them appointed Commissioners with direct European Union experience. The same number of such countries (9) had countries appointed a Commissioner with either direct or indirect European Union and/or diplomatic experience. However, in more-influential countries, the pattern of Commission appointees having European Union-related experience in national governments is slightly weaker than that present in less-influential countries. Of those appointees without direct European Union experience, none previously held a European Union- or foreign affairs-related portfolio in cabinet.

Thus, there is only slight variance between less-influential and more-influential country appointees in terms of European Union experience (both direct and indirect). This is a direct contradiction to Doring's national influence theory. While Hypothesis 1 is thus technically supported, the results may thus point more to the validity of Hypothesis 3—what this paper terms the Commission capture hypothesis—than offer any empirically significant conclusions in and of themselves.

*Hypothesis 2 (The more power a given political party has in a given national parliament and national cabinet, the more likely that party is to appoint cabinet ministers from the same party): Supported.* In a vast majority of cases (83 % across all Commissioners), parties in power in national government nominated members of their own party for a Commission post. In the five cases where national party in power and Commissioner appointee party differed, two (40 %) were cases where the Commissioner was an independent at the national level.<sup>15</sup> Of the other three cases, two (President Jose Manuel Barroso of Portugal and Androulla Vassiliou of Cyprus) were carryovers from the previous Commission; Barroso's party was in power when he was originally nominated in 2004 (explaining the lag between appointment and the next relevant election in Portugal, which occurred in 2009), while Vassiliou's was not when she was nominated in 2008. The remaining case (Stefan Fule of the Czech Republic) previously held the European Affairs portfolio in national government. Thus, party is strongly correlated to Commission appointment—but in the cases it does not explain,

15 These were Andris Piebalgs of Latvia and Dacian Ciolos of Romania—both less-influential countries.

European Union experience (both direct and indirect) is also a strong relationship. Again, as with Hypothesis 1, the strong relationship of European experience with appointment to the Commission, regardless of party affiliation, is a notable finding.

*Hypothesis 3 (Politicians appointed to the European Commission will remain in the Commission): Supported with given data.* More than half (52 %) of Commission appointments in 2010 (the last appointment cycle) were carryovers from the last Commission. This means that appointees held seats in the 2004–2010 Commission (Barroso I)—but not necessarily that they had an identical portfolio, or held seats in Commissions prior to Barroso I. Commissioners seem either to become co-opted by the European Union and wish to stay, or national governments perceive re-nomination of an existing “Commissioner in good standing” as a political hurdle too high to jump vis-à-vis other member states. These findings present a novel relationship independent of political party or European experience: that of Commission capture.

Table 4: Support For/Against and Empirical Outcomes for Each Hypothesis

Hypothesis	Supported?	Descriptive Statistics
1. State influence and Commissioner experience	Yes—but not conclusive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 53% of less-influential member states appointed Commissioners with EU experience; 50% for more-influential</li> <li>• 82% of less-influential member state appointees had EU experience and/or held an EU-related or Foreign Service office in national government</li> </ul>
2. Partisan appointment processes/national level	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 17% of Commissioners appointed by party different than their own</li> </ul>
3. Commission capture	Yes (historically)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 52% of Commissioners held prior Commission post (not necessarily in 2005–2010)</li> </ul>

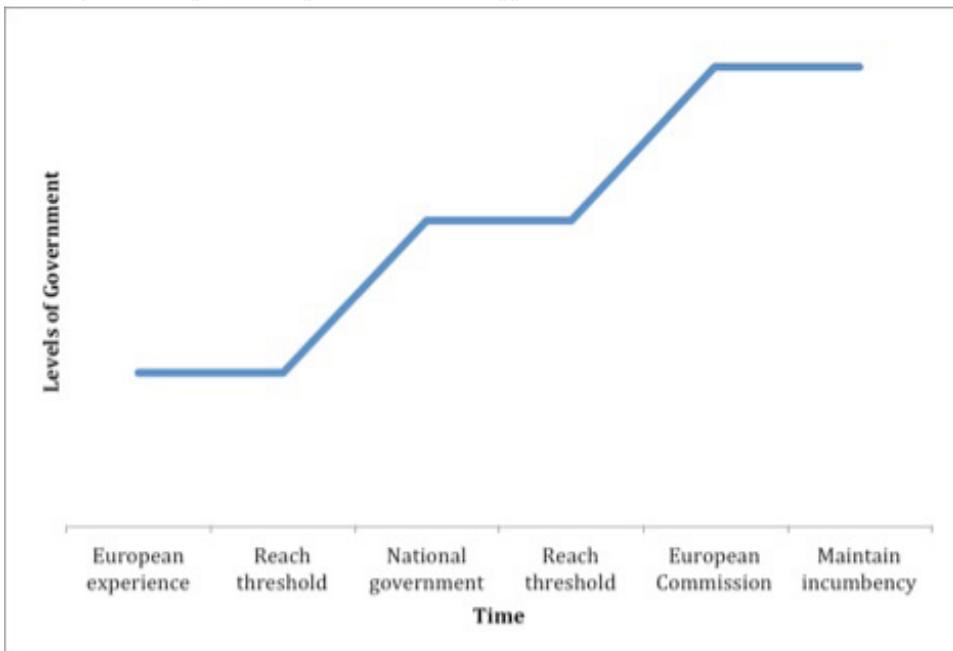
Additionally, several *major trends* in the data became apparent in both datasets throughout the course of hypothesis testing. In terms of biographical credentials (e.g., age and level of education), there seems to be a trans-national elite across the Commission: all 29 Commissioners examined received a college education, and 41 % of Commissioners obtained a doctoral degree. Commissioners are also almost uniformly middle-aged (the average age of the current College is 58) and follow a linear career path, ending with an appointment to the Commission (86 % followed such a path; only 14 % held European office before holding national office). Such careers often begin in national parliament and plateau in national cabinets: 62 % of Commissioners’ last national office held was a senior cabinet position. Taken together, these trends point to a common elite following a well-trodden path to the Commission—and remaining in Brussels once there. Coupled with findings derived from hypothesis testing, they hold important implications for the composition of the Commission, as discussed below.

Table 5: Substantial Non-Hypothesis Trends in Data Collected

Trend	Descriptive Statistics	Logic?	Key Variables
To some extent, a common elite	All Commissioners college-educated; 41% have PhDs	Certain “paper credentials” required to break appointment threshold	Age, Education, Occupation, Previous European Office, Previous National Offices, Other Political Offices Held
Linear paths to the Commission	Only 14% of Commissioners held office at EU level first, then national level; of those 14%, 75% were from less-influential countries	Need to establish credentials at European level, yet also gain attention/approval of national nomination gatekeepers	Previous European Office, Previous National Offices, Other Political Offices, Years of Service, Branch of Government
Most Commissioners come from cabinets	62% of Commissioners held last national office in cabinet	Again, need to secure attention/approval of national gatekeepers	Previous National Offices, Branch of Government, Cabinet Results

**Eligibility Threshold versus “Intangibles”: A Common Elite?**

Figure 1: Simplified European Commission Appointment Process



Broadly, the patterns of European Commission appointments identified by these data fit several models identified by the literature—but also seem to offer conclusions not immediately relevant to legislative recruitment, personal histories, or institutional power predictions of Commission appointment. To this end, all three of this paper’s hypotheses are supported, although some more than others. Perhaps the most important finding of this paper’s empirical investigation, then, is the likelihood of European experience (again, be it direct or indirect) among appointees to the Commission—almost regardless of other variables. From these data, and from this trend of past experience at the European level, a clear path of appointment to the Commission emerges (one outlined above in Figure 1).

This paper thus posits that, instead of relative national influence, shared socioeconomic histories, or other variables, European experience (captured by previous European office(s) held, as well as any European-related portfolios held in national government) is key to explaining appointments to the Commission. Directly, empirical testing of Hypotheses 1 and 3, as well as more informal trend identification throughout the data, support this assertion. There is certainly some degree of commonality across such biographical variables as education and age—but most strongly among offices held. Partisan affinity at the national level is also strongly correlated—but is less important, at a broader level, than European experience among Commission appointees.

### **CONTEXT AND IMPLICATIONS**

This relationship between European experience and appointment to the Commission has important implications. Significantly, member state relative influence appears to be not a variable in and of itself, but instead a framework for analyzing European experience among Commissioners—and how that leads to appointment. As discussed earlier in this paper, more- and less-influential member states both derive benefits from experienced bargainers at the European Union level, but for slightly different reasons. Appointees with direct European Union diplomatic or official experience, or even former national Foreign Service officers, often hold the same type of credentials, gained by a certain kind of experience with or at the European level, seemingly valued by both types of member states: experience dealing with, and lobbying at, foreign governments. These skills are, however, arguably more valued by less-influential member states, as they have more to lose at the European level—which explains the slight empirical variation. Both types of states value European policy bargaining experience, but less-influential member states value it more.

Common European experience gets to the heart of this paper: Is the European Commission a common elite, or does appointment vary by member state? Certainly, as noted at several points in the previous section, Commissioners tend to share common “paper credentials” (older age, higher education, cabinet service, partisan strength at home), but also share more of what Georgakakis would label “pro-European socialization,” in that they remain in Brussels for more than one Commission term. Commissioners, to some extent, tend to share a common European experience, and are thus a homogenous transnational elite in this sense. Relative national influence, again, serves more as a framework for explaining variance between the career histories of individual Commissioners—for example, why Germany sent a significantly less-experienced politician to Brussels compared to Slovenia—but is not powerful enough to delineate broader trends across the entire Commission.

For European Union member states, and especially for less-influential member states,

governments' ability to replace departing officials with new, properly qualified<sup>16</sup> ones is a real concern. Composition of government at the European Union impacts national supply pools of such politicians. European Commission appointment patterns identified herein thus seem to be troublesome for less-influential member states: Commissioners, once appointed, seem to be staying at the Commission indefinitely (Hypothesis 3). Because less-influential member states value benefits derived from the European Union (especially regional development aid), they may gain from these appointments in terms of policy gains at the European level—but may lose in terms of effectiveness and competency of government at home.<sup>17</sup>

At a broader level, Commission appointment is important not just for Europe, but for the United States and other non-European Union countries as well. For example, the Commission is currently leading negotiations with the United States on a broad and substantial free trade agreement. Commissioners, implicitly, play a large role in these negotiations: policy bargaining is, at the highest level, dependent upon effectiveness and competency of Commissioners, who bring their personal histories and their policy experiences to the bargaining table in Brussels. Again, who governs at the European level is likely to affect policy outcomes and European Union effectiveness—even for foreign countries outside of the Union.

#### FURTHER RESEARCH

Perhaps the most exciting outcome of this project is the diverse avenues of further research. The body of literature on the European Commission, as alluded to previously, is diffuse and developing—and this project's empirical foundation provides a multitude of opportunities for further research. Outstanding questions raised herein range from Commission appointment procedures and factors at the national level (the unit of analysis being national officials negotiating appointments) to post-appointment portfolio allocation to policy bargaining and analysis of (perceived) gains among more-influential and less-influential member states.

The avenue of future investigation most directly related to this paper's research centers on incumbent Commissioners: Under what circumstances do incumbent Commissioners lose their seat in the College? As investigation of Hypothesis 3 suggested, Commissioners, like members of the United States House of Representatives, tend to stay in their seats once they are appointed. Hypothesis 3 can benefit from a more micro-level, case study approach to changes in Commissioners involving incumbents. Examining such events, and reasons for such events, with a fine-toothed comb at the national level will add empirical strength to Hypothesis 3.

Similarly, it may be important to examine perceived influence of the Commission (and, perhaps, the European Union as a whole) over time among both appointers and appointees. Have perceptions of apex of European system changed? More importantly, are this project's results generalizable over time—over past Commissions? To examine these phenomena requires not only an extended data set, but also a first-person interview approach. Interviews of national government officials, who *actually* appoint, as well as retired European Commissioners, will inform future arguments about Commission appointment by providing a qualitative set of data not readily visible in quantitative approaches. Were

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16 Again, those able to break the socioeconomic threshold for office, as well as those sufficiently experienced in national politics.

17 See the next section for a discussion of future research avenues on this topic.

Commissioners, for instance, groomed for a seat on the Commission for their entire career, or was their selection more circumstantial? This project takes a more second- and third-level approach to these questions. Especially in the case of perceptions of power and strategic appointments (bargaining versus technical skills, for example), analysis of those actually *doing* the appointing, as well as appointees themselves, on the national and European levels is key to understanding the fundamental causal mechanics of Commission appointment. This paper lays the empirical foundation for such an analysis.

Policy is another area ripe for analysis. First and foremost in this area is portfolio allocation. How are portfolios allocated—beyond formal mechanisms? Is there a variance between less-influential and more-influential member states on this variable? Furthermore, is there a variance of policy outcomes and bargaining effectiveness between Commission appointees from less-influential member states and more-influential member states: do less-influential member states succeed at the EC? Do they actually derive benefits? How does this impact appointment? This paper begins to hint at these questions, and proposes several analytical frameworks for analysis of these questions.

## **CONCLUSION**

This project provides a strong starting point for further analysis of European Commission appointments. Country influence, following Doring, remains an important variable and framework for explaining differences in appointments—but is not a strong corollary variable in and of itself. Empirically, having held a European Union-related office (either in the Commission, in the Parliament, or in national government European Union affairs) is a key explanatory variable in appointments of current European Commissioners. Because less-influential countries have more at stake at the European Union, they are more likely to send experienced European bargainers to the Commission to obtain favorable policies. Because Commissioners tend to remain in Brussels for multiple terms, however, national political recruitment is impacted, and arguably more acutely for less-influential member states. In today's Europe, national politics are becoming ever more impacted by the European Union. Commission appointment is just one chapter in this story—but one of the most important ones.

## **AUTHOR'S NOTES**

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