

The politics of advice in the European Parliament

Citation for published version (APA):

Ruiter, E. (2019). *The politics of advice in the European Parliament: understanding the political role of group advisors*. [Doctoral Thesis, Maastricht University]. Maastricht University. <https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20190313er>

Document status and date:

Published: 01/01/2019

DOI:

[10.26481/dis.20190313er](https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20190313er)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Please check the document version of this publication:

- A submitted manuscript is the version of the article upon submission and before peer-review. There can be important differences between the submitted version and the official published version of record. People interested in the research are advised to contact the author for the final version of the publication, or visit the DOI to the publisher's website.
- The final author version and the galley proof are versions of the publication after peer review.
- The final published version features the final layout of the paper including the volume, issue and page numbers.

[Link to publication](#)

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

If the publication is distributed under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license above, please follow below link for the End User Agreement:

www.umlib.nl/taverne-license

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at:

repository@maastrichtuniversity.nl

providing details and we will investigate your claim.

VALORISATION ADDENDUM

I. Introduction

This valorisation addendum aims to illustrate how the findings presented in my dissertation can be informative for and used by various target groups, both within academia as well as in the public arena.

“Knowledge utilisation is the process of making scientific knowledge suitable and available for use outside of the academic world and/or use within other scientific disciplines. This is not a linear process but a continuous exchange between research and practice.” (NWO, Manual Knowledge Utilisation in the social and behavioural sciences, September 2014).

One of the reasons for starting this research project was the aim to further connect the theoretical discussions on the functioning of the European Parliament to everyday practice. Scholarly discussions on the role of non-elected actors in decision-making processes tend to focus on the perspective of the elected representatives and the way in which they can or should control the behaviour of their staff. In the public debate, the EU’s said backroom politics is one of the popular arguments that spark the polity’s negative image. A (potential) political role of advisors thus raises important questions about the legitimacy of decision-making, both in the eye of the academic world as well as in the eye of the public.

One of the objectives that this dissertation has pursued is to show how advice works in practice. In fact, the connection and translation between the academic theory and everyday practice has been the driving force behind the chosen approach in which the focus lies on how advisors deal with delegated responsibilities. The dissertation provides two key contributions in this sense. First, a link is made between the theoretical and

practical perspectives by providing an analytical tool to enable the separate assessment of the political and technical dimensions. Second, the large-scale empirical study of EP group advisors sheds light on how advisors operate in EP negotiations. The implications of these contributions are elaborated in this valorisation addendum. The following sections consecutively discuss the potential for knowledge utilisation (section II), the interested parties and the way in which the knowledge can be usable and made available to these target groups (section III).

II. Relevance: the potential for knowledge utilisation

The potential knowledge utilisation of the conducted research resides in the manner in which the findings presented in this dissertation can inform and feed into broader discussions on the EU's democratic legitimacy, and more generally, into discussions regarding the role of advice in the coming about of legislation.

For years, the democratic quality of the decision-making processes that result in EU laws has been subject to academic and public criticism. As a supranational polity, the EU faces several democratic 'challenges' in relation to transparency and popular support. The empowerment of both the EP and national parliaments in EU decision-making has been one of the responses to this critique (see Introduction). In this context, the role of 'back-stage' advisors has given rise to a normative debate regarding their influence or capacity to have an impact on EU policymaking. The research findings have demonstrated that key stages of the decision-making process are informal, and thus generally provide no access to observers. The trend towards informal decision-making raises the value of political advice and elevates the importance of understanding the intra-institutional preparatory dynamics. The informal stages take place behind the scenes and prior to the 'actual' decision-making in parliamentary committees or in the plenary.

Not only does this mean that these stages take place outside of public and political scrutiny, they can also be difficult to follow for societal and other stakeholders. Moreover, the lack of information and insight regarding crucial aspects of certain compromises means that outcomes can be difficult to comprehend for the wider public.

The societal relevance of the thesis is tied to the insights that are offered about the informal intra-parliamentary preparations of EU decisions. A deeper understanding of how the decision-making process is prepared is crucial to fully appreciate political negotiation and compromise building. In my opinion, media reports more often than not lack nuance and fall short in addressing the details of how things work. The findings presented in this dissertation may contribute to a more nuanced public debate of how decisions come about in practice. The empirical findings contribute to uncovering how political decisions are prepared, which provides a valuable contribution to the wider public debate and opinion-formation on EU politics and democracy and may inspire similar discussions in relation to national legislatures.

Studies have shown that the lack of transparency and public involvement in EU decision-making is problematic for democracy and deteriorates public trust. Informal processes that take place behind the scenes are untraceable. Intransparency affects public scrutiny and dilutes political contestation and public-opinion formation as policy choices remain unclear. It is necessary to increase the general understanding of how things work in order to strengthen the democratic nature of EU decision-making. Increased insight into the informal stages that result in compromises can assist opinion-formation on EU policies. This may be helpful for national, regional, and local policymakers, the media, and the general public. Similarly, the unravelling of the internal machinery of the EP may be beneficial to interest

representation. These are just a few of the interested parties for whom the research findings can be useable. This is further discussed in section III.

The conducted research has demonstrated that group advisors lay the groundwork for compromises in the EP and do not operate on the basis of clearly defined instructions. Their important role can on the one hand be interpreted as an affirmation of the influential back-stage role of non-elected actors. And fulfilling such a role may further feed the public distrust of political systems and expertise. However, on the other hand, the research has shown that extensive coordination and deliberation systems are in place. These processes are crucial to the functioning of a democratic system and the findings show that coordination and deliberation are significantly facilitated by non-elected actors. Moreover, the findings suggest that activities carried out by advisors are guided by the ideology and aims of the political group they represent. In that way, they are like the 'oil' in the legislative machinery, coordinating different views and working towards broad agreement both within and between the EP party groups. Without their contribution, the intra-parliamentary coordination process would probably be less comprehensive given time and resources constraints of elected representatives.

Gaining a better understanding of the politics of advice is increasingly significant against the backdrop of a changing public policy landscape. The advent of post-factual politics and the emergence of populist right-wing parties as mainstream have created a crisis of trust. Under the banner of 'alternative facts', the fading trust in expertise or objective knowledge substitutes rational proof with emotional appeals. This development is illustrated by the election of President Trump in the United States, the Brexit vote in the UK, Russian propaganda, and the electoral success of populist movements across Europe. These examples furthermore demonstrate a deteriorating sense of trust in the political establishment and a rise of anti-

EU sentiments. On the one hand, they raise the importance of the legitimacy of advice, while on the other hand, internal resources that cater to the politician's information needs become ever more important for the navigation through a complex arena. The latter is illustrative of the trade-off between efficiency and legitimacy that characterises EU decision-making (see Introduction).

A negative image, lack of understanding or disinterest in the EU's functioning, and thus the added value of the polity, are among the causes for the low turnout in EP elections. The findings have the potential to better inform policymakers, opinion leaders, media, and the general public. A well-informed and more nuanced public debate on the European Parliament is necessary to improve the attention for and participation in EU democracy. The upcoming EP elections form an opportune moment to test and shape this potential. This is further discussed in the next section.

III. Target groups & implementation

The previous section discussed the potential knowledge utilisation of the conducted research. This section specifies the interested parties in respect to the definition and typology of political advice that are advanced in the thesis, as well as to the presented findings about how decisions are prepared by advisors. It suggests how the research may be used by the various target groups and offers possible avenues to make the conducted research available and suitable for future knowledge utilisation.

First of all, both the conceptual approach and the analysed empirical material are valuable to scholars working on the EP, informal politics in the EU, and the politics of expertise in the EU. More generally, the conceptual framework may be employed to assess power structures in other legislatures or institutions and tease out the political dimensions of activities

carried out by advisors. Academic discussions on political delegation tend to focus on the perspective of the elected (why do politicians delegate, how do they try to control their advisors, etc.). The framework offers a novel approach to take into account both the personal and contextual perspectives for the assessment of the discretion of advisors. In this way it enables the connection between theory and practice. Moreover, advisors serving a collective of political superiors (e.g. a political party) form a distinct group of actors that have so far only received marginal scholarly consideration. The findings demonstrate how advisors operate in everyday practice which can inform and inspire future studies on EP staff, their cooperation, division of labour, and the possible influence of external stakeholders or events on their activities. Furthermore, the conducted research can be used as a starting point for the study of political advisors in other legislative settings (see chapter 8.6 for a more detailed description of the future research agenda).

Second, the knowledge and insight regarding the practice of decision-making rendered by the thesis is crucial for teachers and students. It could be included in future education and training programmes on European studies, public administration, or political science. Several propositions for dissemination are proposed below.

Third, politicians and opinion leaders can use this practical knowledge to prepare for public debates, the campaign leading up to the 2019 EP elections, or for upcoming national elections in which EU integration may be on the agenda.

Fourth, the findings can be informative and instructive for a variety of professionals involved in interest representation. Representatives of national, regional, and local governments, interest groups, lobbyists, and consultants could benefit from the information that the thesis offers on the

functioning of the informal stages of decision-making. During these early preparations and negotiations, the need for policy input will be the highest among politicians and their advisors. Thus, this stage in the decision-making process provides the best opportunity for influencing legislation.

Fifth, the leadership and human resource managers of the EP party groups can use the findings to gain insight into the performance of their advisors. In the dissemination proposal below, an instrument is suggested that could be developed for the evaluation of the performance and/or the recruitment of (successful) group advisors.

Journalists are the sixth target group that can benefit from the research conducted. The findings presented in this dissertation may contribute to a more nuanced public debate of how decisions come about in practice. The empirical findings contribute to uncovering how political decisions are prepared, which provides a valuable contribution to the wider public debate and opinion-formation on EU politics and democracy and may inspire similar discussions in relation to national legislatures.

Finally, as implied earlier, the findings have an important potential contribution to informing the general public. Several suggestions to engage are proposed below and the upcoming 2019 EP election campaign is considered to provide the right momentum.

The abovementioned target groups may be reached through various channels. The following avenues are proposed for future dissemination of the research results:

- (i) Instrument for the performance assessment of EP group advisors, and/or recommendations to the leadership of the EP party groups.

- (ii) Infographic about the various activities that take place during the early and informal stages of EP decision-making.
- (iii) You tube video that explains the various activities that take place during the early and informal stages of EP decision-making.
- (iv) (Digital) toolkit for teachers providing information about the practice of decision-making. Topical examples of files progressing through Parliament could be used to give students practical assignments.
- (v) Handbook targeting students of political science, public administration or governance, and European studies.
- (vi) Guest lectures for students and professionals (e.g. teachers, civil servants, public affairs managers).
- (vii) Participation in the public debate to increase the general public's knowledge of this subject: e.g. through newspaper articles and reaching out via social media. The upcoming EP elections provide momentum to raise awareness of how things work in practice, and why that matters.
- (viii) Other forms of dissemination could be achieved through co-publications or events with societal stakeholders (e.g. local and regional authorities trying to reach their citizens, the representation of the EP and/or EC in The Hague).

In sum, the knowledge and insights that this research project have generated are useful and can be made available to a variety of stakeholders. This is something that I, and hopefully others with me, will continue to pursue from this moment onwards.