

The Power of the Presidency: Brokerage, Efficiency and Distribution in EU Negotiations*

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Abstract

Decision-making in the European Union is subject to the risk of negotiation failure, because of governments' incentives to conceal their true preferences. This article argues that the EU Presidency possesses a set of informational and procedural resources that can help unlock incompatible negotiating positions and secure efficient agreements, while simultaneously allowing the government in office to shape distributional outcomes. Drawing on general bargaining theory and rational choice institutionalism, it presents a theory of the demand for, and supply of, brokerage by the chair. The explanatory power of this theory is demonstrated through two case studies: Germany's chairing of the *Agenda 2000* negotiations, and France's chairing of the IGC 2000 negotiations.

Introduction

Decision-making in the European Union is subject to the risk of negotiation failure. At the start of negotiations, EU governments tend to be secretive about their true preferences and adopt tactical negotiating positions that reduce or eliminate the contract zone that is necessary to realize joint benefits. This article argues that the EU Presidency can play a crucial role in unlocking incompatible negotiating positions and securing agreement, thus preventing negotiation failure from materializing. Drawing on general bargaining theory

* For valuable comments on this article, I would like to thank Ole Elgström and two anonymous reviewers. This article has been written as part of a collaborative research project on the EU Presidency, based at Lund University and funded by the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation.

and rational choice institutionalism, it presents a theory of the demand for, and supply of, brokerage by the chair. The explanatory power of this theory is demonstrated through two case studies: Germany's chairing of the *Agenda 2000* negotiations, and France's chairing of the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) 2000 negotiations.

Owing to its formal position, the Presidency possesses a set of informational and procedural resources that can be used to encourage concessions and achieve convergence in EU governments' negotiating positions. Yet, equally important, Presidencies are tempted to use these privileged resources for national gain, and typically exploit the position as broker to favour the outcomes they desire. If the contract zone permits a number of efficient agreements with varying distributional consequences, Presidencies will promote the outcome closest to their own preferences. The primary constraints on the chair's brokerage activities are formal rules and informal norms.

This article addresses two weaknesses in the existing literature on EU negotiation and decision-making. First, whereas empirical analyses of various EU negotiations often point to the contribution of the Presidency to outcomes (Stubb, 2002; Bjurulf and Elgström, 2004), the dominant theoretical models of intergovernmental bargaining typically do not recognize the function and influence of the chair (Garrett, 1992; Hosli, 1996; Moravcsik, 1998). This is largely explained by the intellectual origin of these models in game theory, which conceives of bargaining as decentralized and actors as functionally equivalent, leaving little theoretical space for variation in the parties' formal control of the game. Second, with the exception of a limited number of studies (Wurzel, 1996; Metcalfe, 1998; Tallberg, 2003; Elgström, 2003a), the existing body of literature specifically devoted to the EU Presidency tends to be atheoretical and descriptive in orientation (O'Nuallain, 1985; de Bassompierre, 1988; Kirchner, 1992). Partly because of its lack of communication with general theoretical traditions in political science, this literature has tended to underestimate the influence of the EU Presidency on political outcomes; in fact, it is commonly asserted that this office carries adverse consequences for its occupant's capacity to secure national interests.

The article is organized in three substantive sections. In Section I, the general theoretical logic is introduced and the resources and constraints of the EU Presidency are identified. Sections II and III present the two case studies. In both cases, the article offers a reinterpretation of these negotiating processes, paying specific attention to the role of the Presidency in achieving and shaping the outcome. The two cases have been selected because of the respective Presidencies' extreme preferences in the two negotiations, which make it relatively easy for the analyst to observe the impact of the Presidency government on distributive outcomes, compared to cases where Presidencies

hold central preferences. The article concludes with a discussion of the generalizability of these results and their wider implications for the study of negotiation and decision-making in the EU.

I. The Strategic Broker

The role and influence of the Presidency in EU negotiations are anchored in general processes of demand for, and supply of, brokerage in multilateral bargaining (Tallberg, 2004a, b). This section first introduces the general theoretical logic of these processes, before identifying the strategic environment in which the EU Presidency operates.

The Power of the Chair: A Rationalist Theory

General bargaining theory identifies negotiation failure as a standard problem in collective decision-making (Walton and McKersie, 1965; Lax and Sebenius, 1986). In order to reach an agreement that is satisfying to all participants, parties must signal what they can and cannot accept. Yet revealing information about one's true preferences is risky and non-tactical; risky, because it exposes a party to exploitation, and non-tactical because it deprives a party of concessions as a weapon for extracting favours from others. Negotiators therefore have an incentive to be secretive or dishonest about their true preferences. The result is a distorted picture of preferences that either reduces the contract zone, with the effect that 'gains are left on the table', or eliminates it, with the effect that negotiations break down. This bargaining problem is amplified in the multilateral setting, with its particular difficulties of communicating preferences between a large number of participants.

The functional solution to this problem is the involvement of a third party – a broker – who can act as a channel of reliable information about the nature of preferences. In multilateral negotiations, this is a role often assigned to the chair, who is delegated certain formal or informal process functions. These functions endow the chair with a set of power resources that permit it to facilitate collective agreement. Analytically, these resources split into two forms: asymmetrical control of information and procedure.

By virtue of its position, the chair gains access to information that is unavailable to the negotiating parties. Bilateral encounters allow the chair to obtain information about the parties' true preferences and resistance points. Through the management of the agenda and the search for viable compromises, the chair acquires an expertise in the dossiers under negotiation. In addition, the chair tends to develop an unusual command of the formal procedures of negotiation. The chair's asymmetrical control of the negotiating process encompasses both the general procedure and individual sessions. As

process manager, the chair enjoys privileged control over decisions on the sequence of negotiations, the frequency of negotiating sessions, and the method of negotiation. As manager of individual negotiating sessions, the chair opens and concludes meetings, shapes the meeting agenda, allots the right to speak, directs voting procedures and summarizes the results obtained. Expressed in more political terms, the chair enjoys asymmetrical control over who gets to say what, when, how, and to what effect.

By drawing on these power resources, the chair can help negotiating parties overcome bargaining impediments that prevent the realization of collective gains. Privileged access to information about the parties' true preferences enables the chair to construct viable compromise proposals. Privileged control of procedure permits the chair to structure the negotiating process and individual sessions in ways that are favourable to agreement.

Yet the very same power resources can be exploited to pursue national gains as well. An opportunistic chair will seek to exploit its exclusive preference information and procedural control to promote agreements with certain distributional outcomes rather than others. The influence of the chair over bargaining outcomes is therefore best conceived of in terms of both efficiency and distribution: at a first analytical stage, the chair helps negotiating parties reach an efficient agreement; at a second analytical stage, the chair affects the distribution of gains by promoting the one agreement – among a range of efficient outcomes – that is closest to its own preferred position. Expressed in rational choice terminology, the chair moves outcomes first to, and then along, the Pareto frontier.

In the execution of its functions, the chair may be constrained by both formal rules and informal norms. Formal constraints come in two shapes: institutional procedures for the office of the chair, and decision rules for the adoption of proposals. Institutional procedures provide the formal basis of the office of the chair, and include appointment, administrative and oversight procedures. Decision rules shape the ease with which the chair can promote proposals that satisfy the requirements of an efficient bargain, yet meet the partisan interests of the chair. Informal constraints consist of established norms about the appropriate behaviour of the chair. Norms factor into the chair's calculation of gains from alternative courses of action, but do not affect its basic preferences. The existence of multiple, competing norms typically reduces the costs of violation and expands the range of acceptable behaviour.

To summarize, this theory suggests that multilateral bargaining creates a demand for brokerage by the chair, whose informational and procedural power resources enable this actor to influence the efficiency and distributional consequences of negotiated agreements, under the constraints of formal rules and

informal norms. Based on this general theoretical logic, the remainder of this section identifies the specific resources and constraints of the EU Presidency.

Brokerage Resources of the EU Presidency

Privileged Information. The EU Presidency enjoys access to a set of actors and practices that enable it to gain privileged information about EU governments' preferences.

The General Secretariat of the Council plays a central role in the Presidency's gathering of information, and works side-by-side with the Presidency throughout negotiations (Beach, 2002; Stubb, 2002). The Secretariat primarily provides three kinds of information to the Presidency, thus granting the chair a competitive edge. First, and most importantly, the Council Secretariat tracks the preferences and negotiating positions of all member governments. Through the long-term involvement in a dossier and informal communication with government representatives, the Secretariat gains an in-depth and horizontal picture of state preferences. Second, no actor is as familiar with the complex decision-making procedures of the EU and the formal instruments available to the Presidency as the Council Secretariat. Tactical advice on negotiating procedure is part and parcel of the Secretariat's support function, as is legal advice on possible courses of action. Third, the Council Secretariat constitutes a source of expertise on the content of dossiers under negotiation. Much like Commission officials gain intimate knowledge of a subject when preparing a proposal, the civil servants of the Secretariat develop an issue-specific expertise when tracing a dossier through the Council machinery.

The Council Secretariat communicates its information on preferences, procedure and contents to the chair through so-called 'notes to the President' (*notes au Président*). These confidential documents are drawn up exclusively for the Presidency and generally contain information on the background of a proposal, its legal basis, the voting procedure, the state of play in the negotiations, governments' negotiating positions and room for concessions, tactical brokerage advice, and alternative compromises that the Presidency may want to investigate.

The second important source of privileged information on state preferences is bilateral talks initiated by the Presidency. The 'confessional' is a bilateral encounter between the Presidency and a Member State, designed to break the deadlock in negotiations. Confessionals may be convened either during the course of negotiations, by simply adjourning plenary talks for bilateral discussions, or in preparation of negotiating sessions. As suggested by the term 'confessional', these encounters are strictly confidential: 'The President is under oath not to reveal a Member State's "confessed" position to any other Member State, but his secret and privileged knowledge of the positions

and the degree of flexibility of all Member States can enable him to make winning compromise proposals' (Westlake, 1999, p. 115). The sharing of private information is the most important function of the confessional, but it also provides an opportunity to put additional pressure on recalcitrant delegations, and to offer unofficial side-payments.

The Presidency practice of touring capital cities (*tours des capitales*) serves the same purpose of collecting information and bringing pressure to bear. These shuttle diplomacy tours take place at a number of levels in the political machinery. In addition to the prime ministers' visits to all EU capitals prior to summits, less high-profile tours are undertaken by the ministers for foreign and European affairs, as well as senior civil servants. The format of the bilateral encounter enables prime ministers to share information on their 'bottom lines' with the Presidency, without granting the same favour to other bargaining parties, thus improving the chances of agreement at the summit without exposing themselves to exploitation.

Procedural Control. The EU Presidency enjoys asymmetrical control of the negotiating process, on the basis of a broad repertoire of procedural instruments. As one observer notes: 'all Council sessions are essentially stage-managed by the Presidency' (Sherrington, 2000, p. 45).

First, the Presidency is central in determining the pace of Council negotiations. It is the Presidency that fixes the meeting schedule, and even if tradition imposes certain limits, the chair can shape the number and frequency of formal and informal negotiating sessions. The effect is a well-documented variation across Presidencies in the number of meetings in different working groups, committees and ministerial configurations (Sherrington, 2000). Control over the meeting schedule grants the Presidency the capacity to improve the chances of agreement, by speeding up negotiations. The Presidency can call further meetings at short notice, alter meeting agendas to allow greater room for negotiation on certain dossiers, and impose time pressure on the parties.

The Presidency's formal prerogative to decide the format of negotiating sessions constitutes a second procedural instrument. The standard format of a negotiating session at the ministerial level is a formal meeting in the Council's Brussels headquarters, where each minister is accompanied by an impressive tail of officials. To facilitate agreement, the Presidency frequently chooses to shift meetings into restricted session, where only a few, or even no, officials are allowed to stay, thus expanding the ministers' room for manoeuvre. An additional variation on the negotiating format is the informal meetings that the Presidency may convene in the home country. The purpose

of these meetings is to provide a more relaxed and collegial atmosphere that can improve the chances of reaching an agreement.

A third procedural resource is the so-called Presidency compromise. The existence of a specific term for compromises proposed by the chair reflects the Commission's original role as mediator and the Presidency's subsequent development into the preferred broker. Part of the explanation rests with the Presidency's unusual capacity to conclude package deals, owing to its position as lynch pin between the different bargaining arenas in the Council. Such deals may consist of a conventional trade of concessions within the same issue area, but the true value-added of the Presidency as broker is the ability to stitch together unorthodox deals that stretch across a number of issue areas.

In Community negotiations, the Presidency's compromise text competes with the original proposal by the Commission, but supplants the latter as single negotiating text if attracting sufficient support, in which case the Commission is put under pressure to revise its proposal. In intergovernmental negotiations, the Presidency's compromise document faces less competition for the position of single negotiating text. Once the Presidency's text has been established as the basis of negotiation, the chair's ability to engineer agreement around its preferred outcome expands considerably. Since it is also the Presidency's responsibility to determine when an issue is ripe for decision, negotiations generally continue until the Presidency assesses that a sufficient number of governments are on board. Typically, the Presidency does not make use of its authority to call a vote, but instead proceeds by noting the existence of sufficient support, and if nobody objects the proposal is considered adopted. As one European Parliament official explained: 'He who proposes is in the driver's seat. Member States only say no if they totally cannot buy it, which grants the Presidency quite some room to shape deals to its own liking' (Interview, 2 July 2001).

Brokerage Constraints on the EU Presidency

Formal Rules. Since the Presidency's role as broker is not a formal position, but an informal function that has evolved over time, its brokerage activities are not regulated through procedures of *ex ante* or *ex post* control. Instead, the most central formal constraints are decision rules for the adoption of proposals. The most common decision rules in EU policy-making are unanimity and qualified majority voting (QMV). The applicable decision rule conditions the chair's capacity to construct an agreement and to promote its own ideal solution.

When unanimous consent is required, the Presidency must take into consideration the interests of all Member States. Since even outliers must be brought on board, the Presidency is forced to seek solutions that accommodate

the position of the most conservative state, wishing the least change to existing rules. Unless the Presidency's own position is close to that of the most conservative state, the capacity of the chair to promote its own preferred solution is simultaneously reduced. The Presidency's best chance of delivering agreements that go beyond lowest-common-denominator solutions rests with its ability to construct package agreements. If the Presidency can compensate outliers through side-payments, it can conclude agreements that upgrade the common interest.

When only a qualified majority of the Member States is necessary for agreement, the Presidency's room for manoeuvre expands. It becomes easier to construct viable compromises, and to guide negotiations in the Presidency's favour. The effects of extreme positions are mitigated, since outliers can be overruled. Even if actual voting rarely takes place, negotiations under QMV take place 'in the shadow of the vote'. As one Council official explains: 'You note that there is a qualified majority in favour of the Presidency proposal, you invite the remaining states to join and you propose minor modifications in order to increase acceptance, and then you make it clear that it is time to take a decision. Usually, the minority then accepts the proposal without a vote' (Interview, 8 February 2001).

Informal Norms. In its activities as broker, the EU Presidency has to relate to two well-established informal constraints: the norms of neutrality and effectiveness. Both norms have gained semi-official status and are frequently referred to among EU policy-makers and in official documents. The existence of multiple, and often competing, norms expands the Presidency's room for manoeuvre, by enabling the Presidency to justify its potential violations of one norm with reference to another.

Existing research points to the existence of a strong honest broker norm (Metcalf, 1998; Elgström, 2003b). This is further evidenced by the Council Secretariat's handbook for Presidencies, which prescribes that 'the Presidency must, by definition, be neutral and impartial' (1997, p. 5). Presidency action in conflict with the expectation of neutrality can carry negative reputational consequences. Yet Presidencies face incentives to violate this norm only if their own preferred outcome differs from the expected outcome under neutral brokerage. A Presidency with extreme preferences would be most tempted to violate the norm of neutrality, whereas a Presidency with central preferences faces few reasons not to comply.

Also the norm of effectiveness is sufficiently established in the EU policy environment to be expressed in official documents. The report of the 'Three Wise Men' stated that '[t]he Presidency's basic duty in this process is simply to get results It must urge the debate towards conclusions by using the

most appropriate combination of the weapons at its disposal' (1979, p. 36; see also Westlake, 1999, p. 308; Elgström, 2003b). The emphasis on results constrains the Presidency's capacity to promote its own optimal outcome, to the extent that deals with other distributive implications are more readily available. At the same time, the expectation on effective brokerage may enable and legitimize biased behaviour. As one Commission official recognizes: 'A chairman cannot be neutral, then you would never get any decisions' (Interview, 6 December 2000).

The next two sections explore the explanatory power of this theory in two cases: Germany's chairing of the *Agenda 2000* negotiations, and France's chairing of the IGC 2000 negotiations. The case presentations draw on a combination of primary material, in the shape of interviews, documents, and news reports, and secondary material, in the form of detailed empirical accounts, often by participants or close observers of these negotiations.

II. Germany and *Agenda 2000*

The *Agenda 2000* reform package targeted agricultural policy, regional policy, and the EU's financial framework for the period 2000–06. The driving concern behind this reform initiative was the financial implications of admitting 10–12 new states. The Commission's (1997) package of proposals, which effectively required the support of all governments, suggested: firstly, reducing price support for agricultural products and modifying direct income payments to farmers; secondly, concentrating the resources of the EU's regional funds to the areas of greatest need; and, thirdly, capping the annual budget at 1.27 per cent of total EU GNP.

The proposals were extremely contentious and exposed a number of deep rifts between the Member States. The suggestions on agricultural reform were criticized by the UK, Denmark and Sweden for being insufficiently far-reaching, whereas France and Germany were opposed to reform and questioned the alleged problems. The proposed changes in the area of regional policy pitted the majority of Member States against Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain ('the cohesion countries'), which insisted on keeping the special favours they enjoyed. Yet the most contentious issue was the financial perspective, where four major net contributors to the budget – Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Austria – demanded a rebalancing of the system, whereas the major net beneficiaries opposed such a reorientation.

The Negotiations

Progress in the negotiations was slow during 1998, with member governments mainly reiterating their initial positions. When Germany took over the

Presidency in January 1999, the government declared *Agenda 2000* to be its top priority (German Government, 1999). With less than three months left before the collectively agreed deadline, it was essential to achieve movement in the negotiations.

In early January, the Presidency introduced its major strategy for achieving agreement: a draft document dubbed 'the negotiating box', essentially conforming to a single negotiating text or the first stage of a comprehensive Presidency compromise (*European Voice*, 7–13 January 1999, p. 6). The document was organized around the issues of the negotiations, rather than Member State positions, and constituted 'a skeletal pre-draft of what would eventually become the Berlin European Council Conclusions' (Galloway, 1999, p. 15). The language of this shell accord was developed in those areas where governments agreed, but put within brackets in the areas of contention. The purpose of the procedure was to steer work forward through successive revisions of the box, and to ensure a package-deal approach to the negotiations. The result of this strategy was a shift in focus from the demands of outliers to areas of potential compromise (*European Voice*, 4–10 February 1999, p. 11; Galloway, 1999, p. 15; Laffan, 1999). Over the next two and half months, the Presidency fleshed out the contents and filled in the gaps in the box.

The essential elements of the Presidency's brokerage approach were compromise proposals based on consultations with the Council Secretariat, bilateral meetings with member governments to sound out concerns and reactions, weekly negotiations by the ambassadors in Coreper, and ministerial discussions in the Council of particularly divisive political issues. In addition, the Presidency supplemented the formal institutional negotiating structure of the Council with a number of extraordinary high-level groups that were to prove instrumental in the process of reaching agreement, especially in the area of agriculture.

For Germany, the task of brokering a deal was complicated by the fact that it held strong – and not easily compatible – positions on agricultural reform, finances and enlargement (Interview, German government official, 3 July 2001). 'Germany faced the dilemma of pursuing a restrictive policy for the EU budget on the one hand, while opposing any reforms of the CAP aimed at eventually reducing agriculture expenditure of the EU, on the other' (Sergey, 2001, p. 52). Germany's strategy for reconciling its interests was to stress that agricultural reform, while possibly cost-cutting in the long term, in fact involved a short-term increase in agricultural spending, which was undesirable given the general support – and Germany's preference – for budget discipline. In addition, Germany held a strong interest in the enlargement of the EU, which would be best favoured by an early *Agenda 2000* agreement.

As soon as Germany took over the chair, the negotiations on agriculture centred on the financial aspects of reform (Galloway, 1999; Laffan, 1999; Serger, 2001). German ministers first sought support for a capping of the agricultural budget, and once preliminary agreement had been obtained, the negotiations were directed toward methods of budget restriction (*European Voice*, 14–20 January 1999, p. 1; 28 January–3 February 1999, p. 16; 4–10 February 1999, p. 11). The Presidency sought to engineer support for the alternative of limiting or postponing reform measures as a way of reducing the expected costs of reform. Late February and early March saw a number of Presidency compromise proposals (SN 1777/99, SN 2017/99), coupled with bilateral talks. In order to signal that Germany was not prepared to disregard its national interests just because it held the Presidency, the German government took the unusual measure of presenting a national position paper on 5 March. Based on governments' reactions to all these initiatives, the Presidency eventually formulated a compromise proposal (SN 2021/99), which gathered the support of agriculture ministers on 11 March. The compromise restricted or postponed reform in important areas, but exceeded the agreed budget ceiling by €7 billion.

In the negotiations on regional policy reform, the early months of 1999 witnessed gradual convergence on a final compromise (Galloway, 1999; *European Voice*, 18–24 March 1999, p. 2). In a classic concession-and-convergence negotiation, the four cohesion countries and their opponents abandoned their initial positions of about €240 and €190 billion over the next financial period, to seek agreement in the mid-range of the spectrum. In the week prior to the Berlin summit, the two sides were judged to be close to a deal.

In the negotiations on the financial perspective, it proved easy to gain support for the objective of budgetary discipline; by contrast, rebalancing was difficult (Galloway, 1999; *European Voice*, 4–10 February 1999, p. 11; 25 February–3 March 1999, p. 1, 10). In its attempts to reach its preferred outcome, Germany made use of its dual capacity as party to the negotiations and designated broker (Interview, German government official, 3 July 2001). On the one hand, Germany pushed hard for some kind of budgetary adjustment mechanism, supported by the other net contributors. On the other hand, and in search of an acceptable solution, Germany tested out alternative adjustment arrangements on other governments. The alternative most favoured by the net contributors – a general correction mechanism – met with strong objections from the other Member States. The net contributors then directed their efforts at the special budget rebate enjoyed by the UK since 1984. If the UK agreed to give up part of, or the entire, budget rebate of €3 billion annually, these funds could be used to finance a reduction for the net contributors.

The Berlin Agreement

In an effort to prepare the ground for a final agreement in Berlin, the German Presidency attempted to raise the intensity and perceived urgency of the negotiations (*European Voice*, 25 February–3 March 1999; Ackrill, 2000; Serger, 2001). Formal Council meetings were almost exclusively devoted to *Agenda 2000* negotiations, and other issues put on the back burner. In addition, the Presidency used the tactic of calling informal meetings in Germany, often with restricted participation. Simultaneously, Germany tried to instill a sense of urgency by warning of the risk of negative repercussions for the newly born euro currency and Europe's international standing, in the absence of a deal. When the Commission unexpectedly resigned on 16 March, following allegations of corruption, the German Presidency was granted an additional reason for its crisis warnings and calls for unity.

The concluding European Council summit in Berlin on 24–25 March constituted a 48-hour bargaining session, shifting between multilateral negotiations and bilateral talks between the Presidency and member governments. In the end, the German Presidency managed to weld together a compromise package, which was sufficiently appealing to all parties, though markedly shaped by the positions of the most recalcitrant states.

The already existing agreement of the Agriculture Council was renegotiated in order to keep spending below the agreed budgetary ceiling. Eventually, the proposals for CAP reform became so watered down that budget stability was achieved. The two winners were France and Germany, which managed to secure outcomes close to their initial positions on almost all key issues (Ackrill, 2000; Serger, 2001). France had taken a no-reform position all through the negotiations, and thereby forced the other parties toward less and less ambitious reform alternatives. The German Presidency had secured support for the principle of budget stability, which then had been used successfully as an argument against reform. In fact, the final agreement corresponded closely to the German national position paper tabled in early March.

On regional policy reform, the German Presidency could secure unanimous agreement for the level of €213 billion, almost exactly the mid-point between the initial bargaining positions of the cohesion group and the advocates of budgetary restraint. The greatest obstacle to agreement in this negotiation, and arguably its greatest winner, was Spain. Staunchly opposed to reform, the Spaniards pursued what one diplomat described as a 'No, no, no, no, no approach' (*European Voice*, 4–10 February 1999, p. 11). When all other parties at the summit had given their consent to the final agreement, the Spanish held out, and were generously awarded for their recalcitrance.

When governments finally reached agreement on the financial perspective, this deal was designed to meet the concerns of the net contributors,

without fundamentally shifting the burden of financial responsibility (Galloway, 1999). The package contained three central elements: an approach of discipline and stabilization with regard to the overall EU budget; a set of specific measures on the resources and expenditure sides targeted at individual net contributors; and a revision of the financial key for the UK rebate, reducing the contribution of Germany, the Netherlands, Austria and Sweden. The net contributors had not achieved as much as desired, but neither had the net beneficiaries been able to uphold the *status quo* in terms of budgetary growth and redistribution. The state that emerged as the winner from the negotiations was the UK, which managed to keep its budget rebate intact. This outcome is partly explained by the late interest of the net contributors in keeping this arrangement, once the rebate became the means for reducing these countries' net contributions to the EU budget.

The Power of the Chair: Assessing Process and Outcome

The German Presidency made use of the full range of brokerage instruments available to it in its position as chair, and thereby steered the negotiations towards a concluding compromise deal. As one close observer commented: 'Agenda 2000 would still be under negotiation if a firm hand had not been used in managing the negotiation process' (Galloway, 1999, p. 34). Exploiting its powers of procedure, the Presidency shaped the negotiating process by intensifying the formal meeting schedule, moving *Agenda 2000* to the top of meeting agendas, and calling informal negotiating sessions. The Presidency adopted a specific brokerage formula – the negotiating box – that functioned as a single negotiating text, encouraging a focus on issues and trade-offs rather than positions and ultimatums. The Presidency unlocked outstanding issues of contention, particularly at the final stage, through a combination of bilateral confessionals that unveiled the parties' 'bottom lines', and follow-up papers that outlined new compromise alternatives. The Presidency exploited the power of the pulpit and political turmoil in the EU to create a sense of urgency and crisis that facilitated agreement in Berlin. In the end, the *Agenda 2000* deal was considered the main achievement of the German Presidency.

The procedural and informational advantages of the Presidency were instrumental, not only for stitching together a compromise deal, but also for safeguarding German interests. Whereas some observers, especially in the German media, argued that the Presidency emerged as a loser from the *Agenda 2000* negotiations, these statements are based on a one-sided focus on the rebalancing of the budget, and unrealistic expectations as to what Germany could possibly achieve. A comprehensive and more realistic assessment yields a different verdict. The deal that eventually emerged from the negotiations corresponded closely to the German positions on agricultural reform, reflected

German demands for budget discipline over the next financial period, contained provisions for targeted cuts in Germany's net contribution, albeit not as extensive as desired, and balanced competing demands on regional spending. In addition, Germany reached its goal of concluding an agreement in March, which kept the enlargement process on track.

Is it likely that the *Agenda 2000* negotiations would have ended in this particular distributional outcome, had another Member State had access to the power platform of the Presidency? It is not unreasonable to think that the negotiations on regional policy reform, which followed a classic concession-and-convergence pattern, would have yielded a similar outcome under another Presidency. By contrast, the German government's active interference in other areas, to make sure that certain options were on the table and others never considered, suggests that the end result would have been different had a government with opposing interests directed the negotiations instead. This is most evident in the talks on agriculture, where Germany skilfully steered the negotiations away from the reforms advocated by several Member States and towards an outcome closely in line with German financial and agricultural interests.

The German government's brokerage activities were shaped by both formal and informal factors. These are the primary explanations for the problems experienced by the Presidency in brokering an agreement and defending its own interests. The requirement of unanimity worked in favour of those states least interested in reform: France and Germany in agricultural policy, Spain in regional policy, and the net beneficiaries and the UK on the budget. These states had no incentive to agree to proposals that yielded less than the existing arrangements, and the German Presidency consequently experienced problems in stitching together solutions going beyond the lowest common denominator. It also reduced the Presidency's capacity to steer the negotiations towards its most preferred outcome, in those cases where Germany itself was in favour of reform, such as the budget and regional spending.

The norm of effectiveness proved more influential than the norm of neutrality. Throughout the negotiations on *Agenda 2000*, Germany was explicit about its national objectives, both in the bargaining sessions and in the media. Though several observers note that the German government's behaviour in the end game was influenced by the responsibilities of the Presidency office, it was not the requirement of neutrality that affected German actions, but the expectation on results (Interview, Commission official, 9 February 2001). Partly, Germany had itself to blame. The strong commitment to a deal in Berlin and active attempts at instilling crisis awareness meant that Germany, in the end, had to shoulder the responsibility of chairman and deliver an agreement, even if this meant compromising German objectives.

III. France and IGC 2000

The rationale of IGC 2000 was to prepare the EU's institutions for an enlarged Union. The conference addressed four key issues: the size and composition of the Commission, the weighing of votes in the Council, the extension of QMV in the Council, and methods for enhanced co-operation. The issues were extremely controversial, and it was no coincidence that EU governments had failed to find acceptable solutions when first considering these issues at the 1996–97 IGC. The Portuguese Presidency in the spring of 2000 had managed to define the agenda of the IGC, but little movement had taken place in the substantive negotiations on the four dossiers when France took over the chair on 1 July 2000. The conclusion of the IGC during the autumn was the foremost priority of the French government (2000).

The Negotiations

When the French Presidency reinitiated the negotiations, it launched a new approach, composed of a partially new structure for the overall negotiation process, as well as a specific brokerage strategy. The French government announced a fuller schedule of IGC meetings and a new format for the negotiations (Dinan and Vanhoonacker, 2000). Next to the existing negotiating levels of state representatives in the preparatory group, foreign ministers in the General Affairs Council, and heads of state and government in the European Council, the Presidency added a fourth tier of extraordinary ministerial conclaves. Whereas the effectiveness of this move is contested, it illustrated the Presidency's autonomy in shaping the format of the negotiating process. A further step taken by the Presidency was to make the IGC negotiations the focus of several informal ministerial meetings.

The French brokerage strategy consisted of a number of consecutive steps (Galloway, 2001, pp. 33–6; Gray and Stubb, 2001; Schout and Vanhoonacker, 2001). Rather than moving directly to the stage of article drafting, the French began by issuing oriented questionnaires, in order to sound out state concerns. Over time, these questionnaires turned into papers that gradually acquired the form of draft treaty language. In early November, the papers were merged into a summary document that constituted a first outline of a draft treaty, which was then shaped over the coming month into the draft submitted for final negotiation in Nice. In terms of substance, the French Presidency devoted most of the early work to the less sensitive issues of QMV extension and enhanced co-operation. By contrast, the size of the Commission and the reweighting of votes were largely left for the European Council summits in Biarritz and Nice.

There was no denying that France intensely preferred certain outcomes over others. Already at the previous IGC had France insisted on a Commission with a limited number of members. France wanted to secure a reweighting of votes that would compensate large Member States for their likely loss of one Commissioner, as well as maintain French parity with Germany. It was in favour of an extension of QMV, yet concerned to keep the national veto for provisions pertaining to visas, asylum and immigration, as well as the common commercial policy. France was one of the strongest proponents for easier access to enhanced co-operation.

The size of the Commission quickly became the most controversial issue in the negotiations (*European Voice*, 20–26 July 2000, p. 6; 21–27 September 2000, pp. 1, 11). The French Presidency presented a proposal and structured the negotiations in favour of a limited Commission, where each Member State would not be allowed to keep a Commissioner, as desired by the smaller states. While criticized by many as unproductive, this move exposed the underlying fault line and prepared the ground for the informal summit in Biarritz. At that summit, the Presidency managed to gain the support of the other four large states for equal rotation of the posts in a restricted Commission. By declaring their own willingness to lose their final Commissioner, and promising equal treatment, the large states firmly placed the ball in the court of the small states. This proved to be a major breakthrough in the negotiations, which then shifted to the format of such a capping in the number of Commissioners (*European Voice*, 19–25 October 2000, p. 8; Gray and Stubb, 2001).

Negotiations on the reweighting of votes lay dormant for much of the autumn. This was the most important issue for the large Member States, which sought compensation for the loss of (at least) one Commissioner. Real bargaining was postponed by the Presidency to the concluding session in Nice, since any solution to this highly sensitive issue would require concessions that only heads of state and government could make (Gray and Stubb, 2001). The autumn negotiations consisted largely of an inventory of alternative reweighting systems.

From early September onwards, the Presidency devoted considerable time to the issue of QMV (Galloway, 2001, pp. 101–2). In order to facilitate trade-offs at later stages, the Presidency kept as many articles as possible on the list. It became clear that some articles were so sensitive that only part of the subject matter could realistically be moved to QMV. The Presidency developed consecutive draft proposals in an effort to find texts that would respect national sensitivities, yet achieve a maximum extension of QMV (Interview, French government representative, 9 February 2001). This work was particularly delicate in those areas where France itself held the strongest reservations; for instance, the article on the common commercial policy saw the greatest

number of options, redrafts and proposals during the entire IGC (Galloway, 2001, p. 118).

Enhanced co-operation was placed high on the agenda when France took over the chair. The first ministerial conclave was partly dedicated to the issue, as were five of the first eight meetings of the preparatory group. The attention devoted to the issue yielded quick results, and the Presidency's handling of the dossier is generally considered a strong contributing factor (Gray and Stubb, 2001; Schout and Vanhoonacker, 2001; Stubb, 2002, pp. 115–22). Once agreement had been reached that flexibility would not be applicable in the core areas of the internal market and economic and social cohesion, relaxing the conditions for enhanced co-operation proved less controversial. In fact, the European Council summit at Biarritz reached political agreement on all parts of this dossier, apart from enhanced co-operation in foreign and security policy.

The Nice Treaty

As the end stage of the negotiations approached, the French Presidency sought to prepare the ground for a comprehensive agreement in Nice. Formal negotiations were increasingly supplemented by informal bargaining and brokerage (Gray and Stubb, 2001). The Presidency engaged in bilateral talks at three levels: 'confessionals' were held with the state representatives in the preparatory group, European Affairs Minister Pierre Moscovici met with his counterparts in other EU governments on a tour of capital cities, as did President Jacques Chirac shortly before the summit. The likelihood of a deal in Nice improved considerably when Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, after a bilateral *tête-à-tête*, could announce that they had agreed to agree (Dinan and Vanhoonacker, 2001). French insistence on voting parity despite Germany's greater population had until then been seen as a potential impediment to final agreement.

The concluding negotiations in Nice on 8–11 December proved extremely tough and have generally been described as a tug-of-war between national interests, devoid of the honoured Community spirit. The talks began on the Friday night with bilateral confessionals between the French Presidency and the delegations, on the basis of which a draft treaty was distributed for negotiation on Saturday morning. This draft was discarded by the small Member States, which considered it biased in favour of large state positions, both as regards the size of the Commission and the reweighting of votes. A second draft was presented on Saturday afternoon and a third draft on Sunday morning, the main outstanding question being the reweighting of votes. Sunday afternoon and night, multilateral deliberations were interrupted eight times for bilateral consultations with delegations and, one by one, member governments came on board (Gray and Stubb, 2001). To facilitate the last necessary

compromises, the Presidency moved the negotiations to restricted session, excluding all but the heads of state and government. The negotiations could be concluded early Monday morning, once Belgium had given its consent following side-payments from the Presidency.

Member governments reached the compromise that each state would maintain one Commissioner until the EU reaches 27 members, when the number of Commissioners will be capped at a lower level than the number of Member States, and an equal rotation system will be introduced. While temporarily satisfying the small Member States' insistence on one Commissioner each, the compromise is best considered a victory for the French line of reasoning. After Amsterdam, it was generally expected that the large states would lose their second Commissioner, but all states would keep one. The French campaign to cap the number of Commissioners, and the rallying of other large states around the principle of equal rotation, explain the turn of events (Interview, Council official, 8 February 2001).

The final outcome on the reweighting of votes was a complicated triple-majority compromise. According to the new rules, the adoption of an act by QMV requires the support of a qualified majority of votes, a majority of Member States, and at least 62 per cent of the EU's population. The large states obtained the expected rebalancing of voting weight in their favour, and France managed to gain the hotly desired German acceptance of continued parity in votes. The price for formal parity was the new demographic criterion whereby Germany in effect, but not as visibly, was compensated for its larger population. Yet, in order to gain small state support for the demographic criterion, the Presidency had to introduce the new majority-of-states requirement. To ensure unanimous support, the Presidency also engaged in ad hoc deal-making at the end, where Spain gained additional votes, as did the Netherlands in comparison to Belgium, which in turn was bought off with the decision that European Council meetings would take place in Brussels in the future (Interview, French government representative, 9 February 2001).

Member governments eventually agreed to transfer about 30 articles from unanimity to QMV. This was generally regarded a success in numerical terms, but less impressive in substantive terms, since certain key legislative articles remained under unanimity. For instance, QMV in taxation and social security co-ordination was blocked by the UK, and QMV in structural funds decisions was prevented by Spain. In addition, the French government refused to surrender its national veto on some matters pertaining to visas, asylum and immigration, and the common commercial policy.

The question of enhanced co-operation had largely been solved before the summit. The only outstanding issue was whether flexible co-operation should be possible in foreign and security policy. Governments eventually limited

the scope in this domain, enabling enhanced co-operation only for the implementation of certain foreign policy instruments, while excluding matters with military or defence implications.

The Power of the Chair: Assessing Process and Outcome

In the process of steering the negotiations toward a conclusion in Nice, the French Presidency made active use of the procedural and informational advantages of the chair. When taking over the Presidency, the French government exploited its control over the negotiating process by intensifying the formal meeting schedule, introducing a fourth tier in the negotiations, and moving the IGC to the top of the agenda of both formal and informal Council meetings. Towards the end of the process, the Presidency invited the parties to specific, informal negotiating sessions in order to prepare the ground for a final agreement. Throughout the process, the Presidency's documents functioned as single negotiating texts. The negotiating process was structured so as to solve the easiest questions first – extension of QMV and enhanced co-operation – and save the exceedingly thorny matters – size of the Commission and reweighting of votes – for the heads of state and government.

The chair's control over negotiating sessions was used to collect information about state preferences, put pressure on recalcitrant parties, and present revised compromise proposals. The Presidency obtained open information about Member State preferences through questionnaires, and sought private information about the parties' resistance points through confessionals and tours of capital cities. New compromise texts were formulated in response to reactions and new information, and the chair's prerogative of summing up negotiating sessions was used to steer the deliberations in the direction desired by the Presidency. In order to cajole recalcitrant parties into agreement at the end stage, institutional side-payments were invented and distributed in the absence of the traditional money purse.

France exploited its position as chair also to advance its own national interests – a source of significant criticism. While resolute in its ambition to deliver a treaty, the French government was equally adamant on the content of such a deal. It is striking how the French government scrupulously used the position of the chair to advance proposals that essentially constituted national position papers framed as Presidency compromises. 'France took its own proposal as a basis for discussion and assumed that any point on which objections were not raised had been accepted. Contrary to other Presidencies that would consider the different delegations' stands on a particular point, France contented itself with stating its views and asking opponents to stand up' (Costa *et al.*, 2003, p. 124).

The open use of the Presidency's assets to this end resulted in much negative publicity, which some observers interpret as a sign of failure for the French government. Yet, if we assess the substantive outcome of the negotiations, the French were remarkably successful in protecting their own interests. 'France succeeded in what really mattered to her: holding the bottom line on issues of vital national interest' (Meunier and Nicolaidis, 2001, p. 7; see also Interview, Commission official, 8 February 2001). The French managed to produce a treaty in Nice, achieved a future capping in the number of Commissioners, secured a rebalancing of voting weight in favour of large states and formal vote parity with Germany, prevented QMV in nationally sensitive areas, and reached the goal of facilitating enhanced co-operation.

To address the counterfactual question of whether this distributional outcome would have been likely with another government at the helm, we can safely conclude that this probability is exceedingly low. The empirical analysis reveals how the French government used the power resources of the Presidency at key points in the negotiations to favour certain outcomes rather than others. For instance, it is unlikely that one of the EU's small and medium-sized states, had they enjoyed access to the Presidency position, would have tabled proposals and steered the negotiations toward a deal that eventually would leave them without a Commissioner – a key concern for these countries. Similarly, it is highly improbable that any other Member State would have structured the end game of the negotiations so as to achieve the French objective of formal vote parity with Germany, which required the creation of a complicated triple-majority system for qualified majority voting and the invention of institutional side-payments.

The Presidency's brokerage activities were shaped by formal decision rules and informal norms. The requirement of unanimous agreement for all provisions of the Treaty left predictable imprints on the outcome. On the size of the Commission and the reweighting of votes, the brokerage efforts of the Presidency were facilitated by the absence of a *status quo* alternative. No agreement meant no arrangement after enlargement, and all states were therefore anxious to come to some sort of deal. By contrast, concrete *status quo* alternatives existed on QMV and enhanced co-operation – continuation as previously – which meant that the requirement of unanimity favoured the most conservative states: the UK on taxation and social security, Spain on the structural funds, and France on visas, asylum and immigration, as well as the common commercial policy. Except where France itself benefited, this logic reduced the Presidency's capacity to steer the negotiations toward its most preferred outcome.

Cognizant of the norm of neutrality, the French government paid certain lip service to the principle of the honest broker, but let its behaviour be guided

by other considerations. Whenever France's core interests were at stake, the role of neutral arbiter was unquestionably relegated to a position of secondary importance (Costa *et al.*, 2003). When accused by other Member States of partiality, arrogance and misuse of the Presidency, the French government referred to the necessity of achieving results, thus exploiting the tension between the norms of neutrality and efficiency.

Conclusion

When Member States' bargaining positions are incompatible and no zone for agreement can be discerned, the Presidency's brokerage efforts can help governments avoid negotiation failure. The sources of the Presidency's influence are its privileged access to information about state preferences and its instruments of procedural control. Yet these resources are not only used for collective gain, but also for promoting the Presidency's national interests. Typically, Presidencies steer negotiations away from their worst alternative and towards their preferred outcome. As one former permanent representative testified, it is 'almost impossible' for the Council to arrive at decisions that go against the desires of the Presidency (quoted in Troy Johnston, 1994, p. 25). This is confirmed by the *Agenda 2000* and IGC 2000 negotiations: despite negotiating conditions that worked against the capacity of the Presidency to engineer agreement and shape distributional outcomes, the German and French governments managed to strike accords that simultaneously secured key national interests.

These results may be challenged on the grounds that Germany and France possess greater relative power than other Member States and therefore could exert extraordinary influence through the Presidency position, or that these negotiations were high-profile dossiers where the acceptability of Presidency leadership was greater than in routine decision-making. Yet evidence from small-state Presidencies and negotiations on a broad range of topics suggest otherwise. Sweden affected the efficiency and distributional consequences of the EU agreement on new transparency rules during its Presidency in the first half of 2001 (Bjurulf and Elgström, 2004), just as the Belgian government secured agreement on an expanded agenda for the European Convention on constitutional reform during the autumn of 2001 (Kerremans and Drieskens, 2003), and Denmark was pivotal in brokering a final deal in the enlargement negotiations during the autumn of 2002 (Friis, 2003). Recent comparative research suggests that EU governments – irrespective of relative power positions, administrative resources and historically salient identities – use the Presidency office as a vehicle for national political interests (Elgström, 2003a; Bengtsson *et al.*, 2004). These comparisons further reveal that potential

distinctions between 'high-profile' and 'low-profile' dossiers break down in the face of empirical evidence, which testifies that even 'routine' dossiers are often highly politicized and subject to manipulation by Presidencies with outlier interests.

This article carries implications, not only for the prevailing understanding of the EU Presidency, but also for general debates on EU negotiation and decision-making. Intergovernmental analyses present EU bargaining as a naturally efficient process, which does not involve transaction costs that cannot be eliminated by governments themselves, and where outcomes are explained by relative bargaining power. By contrast, claims of supranational entrepreneurship tend to be based on a perspective of EU negotiations as a transaction-cost-rich environment, where supranational actors help remove bargaining impediments. This article lends support to the first part of the intergovernmental proposition, by specifying perhaps the most important institutional mechanism through which governments reach efficient bargains without external intervention. Yet it challenges the second part of the same proposition, by suggesting that governments in charge of the Presidency office can shift outcomes from the natural equilibrium to their own advantage. Whereas the engagement of the Presidency as broker may be necessary for governments to overcome harmful collective-action problems, it simultaneously grants the government in office an opportunity to affect the distribution of gains in EU bargaining.

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