

The European Parliament and the European Council: functions and roles in the eurozone crisis management. A Political Agenda analysis.

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1. Introduction

The economic and financial crisis has had profound consequences not only for the economies of EU Member States, some of which are still far from complete recovery, but also for the architecture of the Economic and Monetary Union. This work aims to analyse the action of the European Council and the European Parliament in response to the economic and financial crisis.

The theoretical approach underpinning this analysis is the policy agendas project, which dates back to Baumgartner and Jones' seminal work appeared in the 1990s and was later applied in comparative studies to analyse political systems other than the US one. In particular, the codebook developed by these scholars allows to study the actions of different institutions by applying a standardized content-coding procedure; it hence enables comparison over time and across policy fields. The agenda setting approach was therefore chosen as it represents an objective way to evaluate the policy areas the European Council (EUCO) and the European Parliament (EP) dedicated most of their attention to, as well as the specific issues in the encompassing area of economic and financial affairs.

The policy agendas project is a very flexible tool to quantitatively illustrate where the main priorities of one single institution lie, and in this perspective we study the content of the EP plenary meetings agendas, which are an objective record of what the EP is up to at the macro-level, in comparison with the European Council Conclusions. Our quantitative analysis is based on the European Council Conclusions database, directly derived from the pre-existent EU Policy Agendas dataset, with the addition of 2013 and 2014 meetings. The European Parliament Plenary Agendas database is entirely original and was compiled following the same content coding procedure used for the European Council Conclusions by EU Policy Agendas scholars.

Our main expectation is that the European Council, as a key deal-breaker taking highly strategic decisions, devoted a larger share of its attention to the crisis, yet with a more unstable coverage pattern and a disrupted distribution of attention shares. On the contrary, we expect the European Parliament to have dedicated a limited part of its agenda space to economic and financial affairs, essentially because of the necessity to continue with all 'business as usual' policies and the lower degree of mediatization of its meetings. Therefore, we expect its agenda to be remarkably more stable, with the attention devoted to economic and financial issues holding more or less a constant share.

The quantitative analysis confirms the expectations and shows that EUCO exercised a key agenda-setting function in leading the reform of the Economic and Monetary Union architecture. On the other hand, the European Parliament has been a pivotal actor in ensuring the adoption of all 'crisis-related' legislation, but it would be probably far-fetched to say that it acted as an agenda-setter in this field. Briefly, it might well be possible to conclude that the economic and financial crisis reinforced the role of the European Council, and contributed to its image as a powerful engine of European integration.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 briefly summarizes EP and EUCO main institutional features and discusses the role played respectively during the Eurozone crisis. Section 3 reviews the literature on the Policy Agenda Project. Section 4 analyses and compares the policy agendas of the European Council and the European Parliament from 2009 to spring 2014. Section 5 compares the two institutions' response to the economic and financial crisis. Finally, section 6 concludes.

2. The European Parliament and the European Council: institutional features

2.1 European Parliament

Directly elected since 1979 by universal suffrage, the European Parliament represents the citizens of the European Union and has traditionally acted as one of the most 'integrationist' institutions of the EU, constantly supporting the reinforcement of its supranational features, as opposed to intergovernmental dynamics which dominate the work of the Council of the EU (Hix and Høyland 2011).

Unlike most national parliaments at Member State level, the EP does not enjoy the power of legislative initiative, which in the EU is a prerogative of the Commission. It is however a co-legislator together with the Council (comprising all Member States' ministers, with a composition varying according to the policy debated), and is responsible for approving all EU secondary law, taking the forms of directives and regulations. Under the ordinary legislative procedure (OLP) (known before the Lisbon Treaty as the 'codecision' procedure) it stands on an equal basis with the Council and submits all legislation proposals to a single reading; a conciliation committee is convened should any disagreement between the two legislators arise. Special legislative procedures apply in particular domains, notably the consultation procedure and the consent procedure, but the OLP has become the standard one, directly signalling the EP's reinforcement within the EU governance structure. Analogously to legislation, the EP also has equal powers to the Council on the adoption of the EU annual budget.

In addition to its legislative and budgetary powers, the European Parliament exercises supervisory functions, namely it oversees the work of the Commission, which is requested to submit regular reports on its executive powers and on the implementation of the EU budget, as well as to reply to the oral and written questions addressed by Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). The EP has over time gained a strong voice in the appointment process of the European Commission, which it now has the right to approve and dismiss. Although the European Council is still responsible for choosing a candidate for the Commission President's post, under the Lisbon Treaty it is bounded to take into account the results of the European elections, hence giving a superior democratic legitimacy to the choice, before the candidate is finally elected by the EP. The Parliament similarly can censure and ultimately dismiss the Commission, and enjoys a range of oversight powers over the other EU institutions.

2.2 European Council

The European Council has completely different features, starting from its much shorter history, as it was formally created at the 1974 Fontainebleau summit. It is composed by the Heads of State and Government of all EU Member States, plus the President of the European Commission and its own President. The latter is a permanent position (elected for two and a half years) since the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty, which marked the formal recognition of the European Council as an EU institution.

Meeting at least four times a year, the main role of the European Council is to provide the Union with impetus for its development and delineate its main future priorities. Initially meant primarily as an arbiter trying to solve by consensus complex, sensitive political issues, its function is nowadays that of an agenda-setting body (Alexandrova et al. 2014a): formally deprived of any legislative powers, it can deal with any policy area and sometimes reform it quite substantially as a result of one of its summits. It addresses deadlocks in the legislative procedures, redefines the Union's priorities and gives impetus to determined issues, hence engaging in dramatic, highly mediatized issue portrayal rather than dealing with low-key, everyday matters. Although the total number of meetings per year can exceed the minimum of four and is set by the European Council itself, the scope of the debate is much more limited than that of the Parliament, and each meeting inevitably has to prioritize some issues over others.

2.3 The role of the two institutions in the Eurozone crisis management and reform

As for the role played by the two institutions in the Eurozone crisis management, the action of the European Council as a major decision-maker is what first comes to mind to scholars and common citizens alike. Decisions somehow related to the economic and financial crisis were devoted ample space in newspapers' headlines and appear to have been one of the most visible outputs of the European Council's action over the last years.

Major changes to the governance structure of the EU in the economic domain, as well as leaps forward in the area of financial regulation, have directly followed from intergovernmental decisions. In spite of the power of legislative initiative firmly resting in the hands of the Commission, a key agenda-setting function has been exercised by EU Heads of State and Government in order to guide the EU's action in these fields. The launch of the European Semester, the new (stricter) fiscal rules enshrined in the Fiscal Compact, the establishment of the Single Supervisory Mechanism and the European System of Financial Supervision: none of the above would have been agreed upon without ex-ante consensus within this highly politicized forum, let alone all decisions related to emergency financial assistance packages via European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF), European Financial Stability Mechanism (EFSM) and later European Stability Mechanism (ESM) funds.

On the other hand, the European Parliament has been a pivotal actor in ensuring the adoption of all 'crisis-related' legislation, notably a wide range of regulations and directives concretizing the enacted measures, but it would be probably far-fetched to say that it acted as an agenda-setter in this field. Although it did apply some modifications to the European Commission's original proposals, the EP appears to have stood in the half-light compared to the European Council, which has been widely acknowledged as the crisis-solver. Furthermore, the EP certainly has limited powers to enhance the share of its agenda dedicated to economic and financial affairs: even if MEPs can discuss own initiative reports or motions for resolution, most of the assembly's work – at least in the legislative domain – consists in taking forward the various committees' activities, in turn influenced by the Commission's proposals.

This perceived inequality in the relations between the two institutions, whereby the European Council acts as a veritable deal-breaker, while the European Parliament tends to ratify already settled decisions, may reflect a change in the institutional balance of the Union. It might well be possible that the economic and financial crisis reinforced the prerogatives of the European Council and contributed to its image as a powerful engine of European integration, while the EP has not been granted a substantial increase in power, nor has it gained a major role in the newly reformed system of macroeconomic coordination. On the other hand, this perception might only be due to

the different degree of mediatization of the two institutions. The European Council, although relying upon a considerable clout, does not exert any legislative power whatsoever and is compelled to rely on the Commission and the co-legislator to implement its strategies and transform its desiderata into outcomes, hence making the EP a key decision-maker whose voice simply cannot be ignored.

3. The Policy Agendas Project: review of the literature

The policy agendas project was launched in the United States by Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, who focused their research on the allocation of political attention at the beginning of the policy cycle (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). The theory is evoked here only in its essential features, as the literature comprised in the policy agendas project, both on the US system and compared, is vast and would require an entire chapter for an adequate presentation. Baumgartner and Jones's analysis, aiming at complementing established studies of the public policy process with a more nuanced view of its initial phases, largely drew inspiration from the psychological concept of bounded human rationality. Human beings do not always make the best decisions in complex environments and do not always attend to the most pressing problems, as dynamics of attention shifting prevent individuals to devote their consideration to the full range of issues at stake. The central assumption of the theory is that these attention dynamics characterize individuals and institutions alike, hence government officials and governmental institutions present similar cognitive boundaries. Government decision makers often have huge amounts of information thrown at them, especially when they are surrounded by actors pushing for policy change: they are faced with fiercely competing issues and it is very difficult to assess what bits of information are relevant or accurate, which ones deserve more attention than others. The political system is accordingly seen as an attention allocating instrument, with a huge amount of information on the input side and public policies as an output (Baumgartner and Jones 2005). The process according to which information is prioritized, and attention is allocated to some problems rather than others, is called agenda setting, and enables the reduction of redundant incoming information streams. The scholars assume that information is not used efficiently in politics, as some bits are totally ignored while others are given disproportionate attention and credibility, giving rise to a punctuated pattern: this process is inevitable and inherently linked to the aforementioned shortcomings of human cognition.

Baumgartner and Jones's research analyses the process whereby the US political system processes information by detecting signals and prioritizes them basing on urgency and other criteria. The preliminary stage of decision making, where attention is allocated to one issue over another, is a very sensitive stage when thresholds of importance based on perceived urgency determine priority setting decisions. Their theory of governmental attention allows them to put forward a generalized model of punctuated equilibrium in public policy. The bounded rationality in information-processing results in the neglect of information until it can no longer be ignored: at the tipping point, it becomes disproportionate and a major shift in attention follows. For this reason, political change is not incremental but rather characterized by an alternation between under-reaction (reflecting stability) and over-reaction (the punctuations). Empirical studies have confirmed the punctuated equilibrium model, which predicts the distribution of attention change to display a high level of skewness, with a majority of very small attention shifts coupled with a considerably high number of large ones, while medium-sized changes are relatively less frequent.

Regarding its methodology, the policy agendas project produced a dataset tracking policy change in the US since the Second World War, with the help of specific policy content categories. The key assumption behind the use of this database is that attention to an issue can be meaningfully measured by its relative occurrence in policy documents, with the number of references interpreted as an indicator of the issue's status on the political agenda (Alexandrova et al. 2014b). The analyzed resources include among others congressional hearings, public laws, executive orders, Gallup surveys, US budget authority data, with each item content-coded according to a comprehensive list of 19 topics and 225 subtopics.

All observations are coded in accordance with the single predominant policy area and are assigned a numerical value, with the resulting relative frequency of one issue signalling its rank on the overall agenda. The resulting database is a powerful tool for quantitative and objective comparison across years and issue areas, in contrast with the qualitative, case-study approach that is predominant in the public policy literature. This approach has remarkable advantages over alternative strategies of data collection such as interviews and surveys, primarily in view of the fact that its standardized nature allows for comparison not only over time, but also between different institutions within a political system or between political systems altogether.

The Policy Agendas Project (PAP) has been successfully exported from the United States, resulting in the creation of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) and the EU Agendas Project. Over the past decade, there has been an increased scholarly attention to agenda setting processes in the European Union. Alongside being an essential stage of the policy process in any political system, the relevance of studying agenda setting in the EU has distinctive features. Studying the EU agenda may in fact highlight some patterns of its institutional and political set-up, which are all the more interesting because of the flexibility and continuous adaptation of the EU's structure over time. In addition, the boundaries of agenda span with its expansion and contraction dynamics might represent a promising source of information on the process of EU integration, notably by analyzing which (and how) issues are dealt with at the European in relation to the national level (Alexandrova et al. 2014b).

The European Council has been the object of particular attention by the EU Policy Agendas team. Researchers collected empirical data by content coding all European Council Conclusions (previously called 'Conclusions of the Presidency') starting from the establishment of this institution in 1975, in order to determine what issues have been addressed at different summits and analyse attention dynamics over the years and phases of European integration. Because of the secretive, closed-door nature of its deliberations, the Conclusions are only an approximate source of the debates held at meetings, but they represent the only available source of information. The EU codebook, comprising 21 major topics and some 250 subtopics, was used to code European Council Conclusions at their smallest unit of analysis, the (quasi)sentence level (Alexandrova et al. 2014b). The data allowed scholars to analyse patterns of agenda development within the EU leaders' forum.

Two main findings appear relevant in relation to the European Council's agenda. First of all, some topics related to the 'core functions' of government, i.e. international affairs, economic issues and governance of the EU, together take up a large part of the agenda most of the time, a result similarly found by comparative analyses of executive agendas in a number of countries. Taken together, the three topics attracted almost half of the agenda space of the European Council over the entire analysed 36-year period, while the remaining policy fields are given each between less than 1 and 7 percent of the total attention (Alexandrova et al. 2012a). In spite of the distinctive pattern of competences attribution between the EU and Member State levels, the European

Union hence shows a common bias towards general core government issues as addressed by all political systems (Alexandrova et al. 2012b). A second key finding of their analysis is the empirical validation of the punctuated equilibrium theory of policy-making, according to which small, incremental changes are punctuated by large shifts in attention to problems (Alexandrova et al. 2012a).

4. Policy agendas of the European Parliament and European Council from 2009 to 2014: a comparison

In this section we analyse and compare the policy agendas of the European Council and the European Parliament over period from autumn 2009 to spring 2014, corresponding to the EP's 7th term. Since our aim is to describe the reaction of the EU institutions to the economic and financial crisis, the study does not go further back in time. This choice prevents the possibility of comparing the pre- and post-crisis scenario, but seemed more suitable to our objectives and constraints. Year 2009 is taken as a good approximation for the start of the crisis, although some of its effects had already begun to appear in 2008, in order to limit our analysis to one parliamentary term and allow for a meaningful assessment of the last legislature.

Given the 'small agenda' of the European Council and the highly mediatized nature of some crisis-related measures (to name some examples, the several decisions to grant financial assistance to Greece or the resolution to establish a banking union), we expect the European Council to give much more space to issues related to economic and monetary affairs, as well as the financial crisis, compared to the Parliament. The latter is expected indeed to devote a relatively limited coverage to economic and financial affairs in its political agenda, yet this attention is expected to be more stable over time. In fact, it is not uncommon that European Council meetings focus solely on a constrained number of issues at time, issues that may receive very in-depth handling but might similarly be dropped off the agenda at the following meeting, when a new 'hot topic' emerges or policy priorities shift. The European Parliament instead has to continue with 'business as usual', i.e. legislation and implementation related to all existing policies, which may not be revolutionized but need 'daily care' and cannot be simply overlooked. Therefore the attention devoted to all policy areas (not only economic or financial issues) is expected to follow a more constant pattern over time, with small and medium-size changes in attention but less major disruptions than what is expected for EUCO. When looking at the qualitative content of the agendas, it is also highly likely that the two institutions prioritize different policy areas, not only at the macro-level but also at the micro-level when analysing the most debated items under the economic and financial umbrella.

The European Council Conclusions database is directly derived from the pre-existent EU Policy Agendas dataset, with the addition of 2013 and 2014 meetings (up to one taking place on 20-21 March 2014). Only the data from the June 2009 summit onwards were retained, and the database was extended using the same content-coding procedure, in accordance with the EU Policy Agendas Codebook. Each item (sentence or quasi-sentence) is assigned two main variables (alongside date and year), which are 'CAPIC' and 'main CAPIC'. 'CAPIC' (Comparative Agendas Project Issue Code) is the main variable and is meant to code for the policy content of each single unit of analysis. Each unit is assigned only one of the topic codes, which are organized in major topics ('main CAPIC' - e.g. major topic 1 is for Macroeconomics, 2 for Civil Rights, Minority Issues and Civil Liberties, 3 for Health and so on) and subtopics ('CAPIC' - e.g. within the major topic

‘Macroeconomics’ 101 refers to Inflation, Prices and Interest Rates, 103 to Unemployment Rate, 105 to Budget and Debt).

In total, the 2009-2014 dataset comprises 31 meetings: 5 of them took place in 2009 (June, September, October, November and December), 6 in 2010 (February, March, June, September, October, December), 7 in 2011 (February, June, December and two each in March and October), 6 in 2012 (January, March, June, October, November, December), 6 in 2013 (February, March, May, June, October, December) and one in 2014 (March). In addition to the March, June, October and December sessions which are the four yearly meetings foreseen by the Lisbon Treaty, some of these were informal (September and November 2009, February 2010, 26 October 2011, January 2012), others were euro area summits (26 March 2010, 11 March, 21 July and October 2011, January 2012) and some were of a special or extraordinary nature (11 March 2011 and November 2012). The database includes 6690 coded sentences or quasi-sentences.

The European Parliament plenary agendas database is entirely original, but similarly compiled following the same content coding procedure. There were 73 plenary sessions of the EP during the 7th term, the first one taking place on 14-17 September 2009 and the last on 14-17 April 2014, with elections taking place for the renewal of the assembly in May 2014. Their distribution over the years is the following: 6 were held in 2009, 17 in 2010 and 2011, 15 in 2012, 12 in 2013 and 6 in 2014. Every item on each plenary agenda is coded, be it a vote on a legislative proposal, an own initiative report discussed by the EP or a debate on any policy area: for example, when the agenda item is ‘State aid rules on services of general economic interest – Report’ it is assigned ‘CAPIC’ 1541 (competition policy) and ‘main CAPIC’ 15 (banking, finance and internal trade). The database contains a total of 5127 agenda items, with an average of 70 agenda items per session.

4. 1 The agenda of the European Parliament (2009-2014)

4.1.1 Composition and dynamics of the EP plenary agenda

The allocation of attention across policy topics shown in Table 1 underlines a clear pattern of emphasis on certain fields. In conditions of scarce agenda space, issues do have to compete for attention and their relative frequency can be taken as a measure of saliency. Research on domestic policy agendas in a comparative perspective has demonstrated that there is a number of more or less unvaried core topics, namely economic affairs, government structure, defence and international affairs, consistently ranking at the top (Alexandrova et al. 2014a). In the case of the European Parliament’s plenary agendas, we can indeed observe that government issues and foreign affairs occupy respectively the first and second position in terms of agenda space. Banking and finance, together with internal market issues, are also high on the EP agenda; this results falls in line with the priority constantly given to the creation and functioning of the single market over the different waves of European integration.

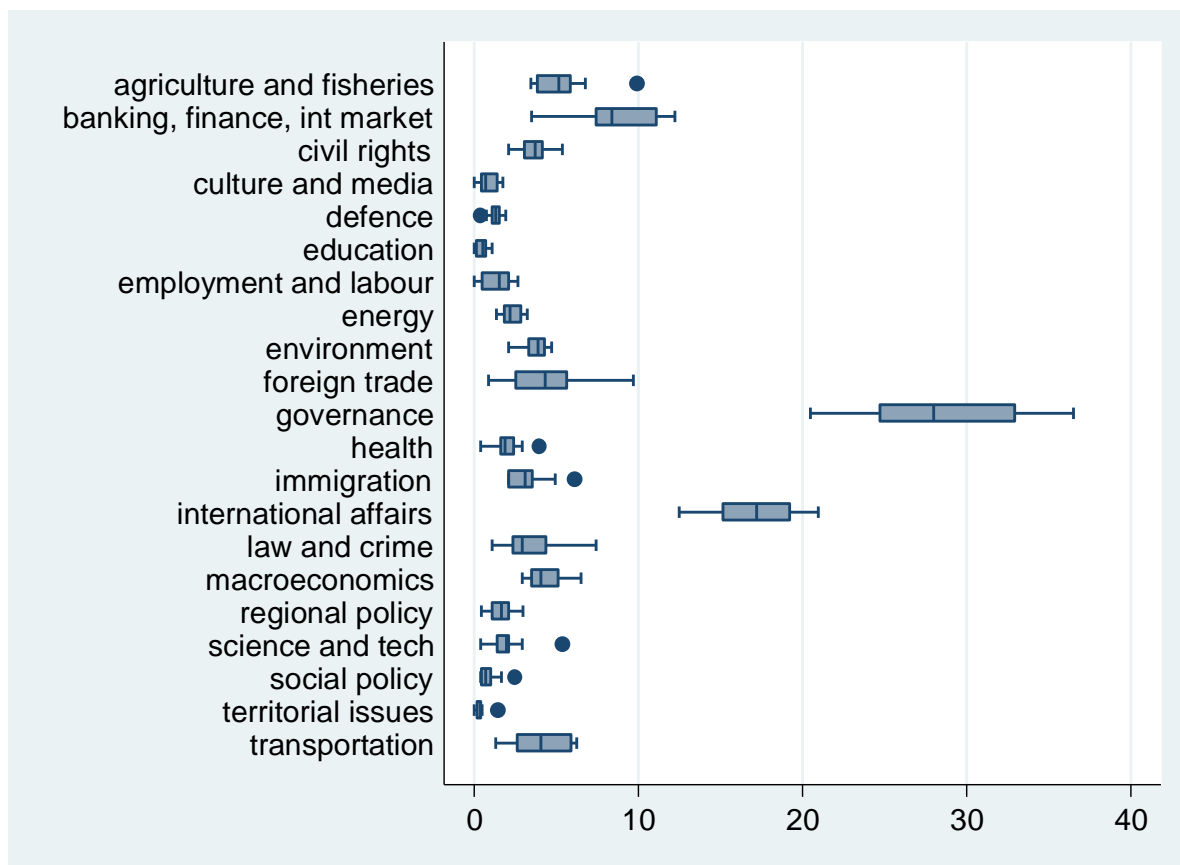
Table 1. Aggregated attention to policy fields in the EP, 2009-2014

Policy field	Frequency	Percentage
EU Governance and Government Operations	1438	28.05%
International Affairs and Foreign Aid	865	16.87%

Banking, Finance and Internal Trade	462	9.01%
Agriculture and Fisheries	275	5.36%
Foreign Trade	237	4.62%
Macroeconomics	228	4.45%
Transportation	214	4.17%
Environment	192	3.74%
Civil Rights, Minority Issues and Civil Liberties	189	3.69%
Law and Crime	167	3.26%
Immigration	165	3.22%
Remaining 10 policy fields (less than 3% each)	695	13.56%
<i>All</i>	<i>5127</i>	<i>100.00%</i>

The rest of the policy areas are all given less than 5% of the agenda each, with relatively more attention to agriculture and foreign trade, while the lowest ranks are occupied by public land and territorial issues, media/culture and education. The attention to all topics on the agenda (on a semester basis) is displayed in the boxplots of Figure 2, which clearly shows how most salient issues are also those subject to the higher degree of variation in their relative frequency on the agenda.

Figure 2. EP attention to all topics on the agenda per semester within the period 2009-2014



For example, governance occupies the first place on the EP agenda, but its relative frequency varies widely, ranging from 20% to 36%; a similar pattern can be easily detected for international affairs (with a minimum of ca 12% and a maximum of 21% of agenda space) as well as banking/financial issues and foreign trade. On the contrary, policy areas consistently receiving a very low degree of attention have a much more stable pattern, with no relevant changes in their relative frequency on a semester basis, as it emerges from the graph. The only possible exception is agriculture, which has a mean of ca 5% of the agenda space but a maximum value of 10%. The variation for all other low-ranking items instead occurs within a concentrated range, meaning that the EP coverage has a very constant nature. This finding matches well with the nature of this institution, which deals with all policy areas taken up by the EU, mainly exerting a legislative function and hence debating/approving pieces of legislation (be it directives or regulations) across the whole spectrum of policy topics.

EU governance and government operations cover almost 30% of the whole agenda of the EP plenary sessions, surpassing largely any other agenda item over the whole 5-year period under analysis. Under this main policy area, almost a half of the occurrences are general matters linked to government, the future of the EU or budgetary matters (all operations related to the budget, from its approval to the discharge procedure and sectorial allocations, are indeed coded in this category). Frequent matters of debate are also institutions and inter-institutional relationships (11%), while nominations/appointments and regulation of political life and ethics both take up more than 5% of the agenda space under the governance umbrella. The second largest topic on the European Parliament agenda is international affairs, with almost 17% of the agenda space, reflecting inter alia the ever-growing powers the EP has gained in this policy field over time. Once again, general references are most frequent (35% of the total), but almost 30% of all foreign

affairs-related agenda items is represented by human rights, signaling the traditionally intense Parliament's concern towards human rights issues and the strong role it plays in this field. Other relevant subtopics are foreign aid and EU enlargement, with each about 10% of the space. Banking, finance and internal trade comes third on the EP agenda, with 9% of the whole agenda space: the European Parliament is hence more concerned with single market and banking/financial issues than with macroeconomics, which occupy the 6th place barely covering 4.45% of the agenda. The variety of issues under this policy area is very wide, with five different topics getting about 10% of the total occurrences: financial markets regulation (hardly surprising, given the high priority given to this policy field during this last term), harmonization of technical requirements, banking system and financial institution regulation, creation of the common market and consumer protection.

Taken together, the three topics of EU governance, international affairs and financial/single market issues attracted more than half of the attention of the European Parliament over the whole 7th term. On a semester basis, their cumulative frequency varies between 45% and 60%, while the remaining 18 policy areas are given a much more limited attention share, as shown in Figure 3. These results therefore confirm the finding of comparative research, showing that 'core functions' of government together account for the lion's share in a political institution's agenda, of course with slight differences in the relative saliency among the exact top areas. However, an interesting pattern can be observed if one adopts a different unit of analysis, notably by breaking down the data and analyzing the distribution of attention by session, instead of taking semesters as units of comparison.

Figure 3. Relative distribution of EP attention to core topics per semester, 2009-2014

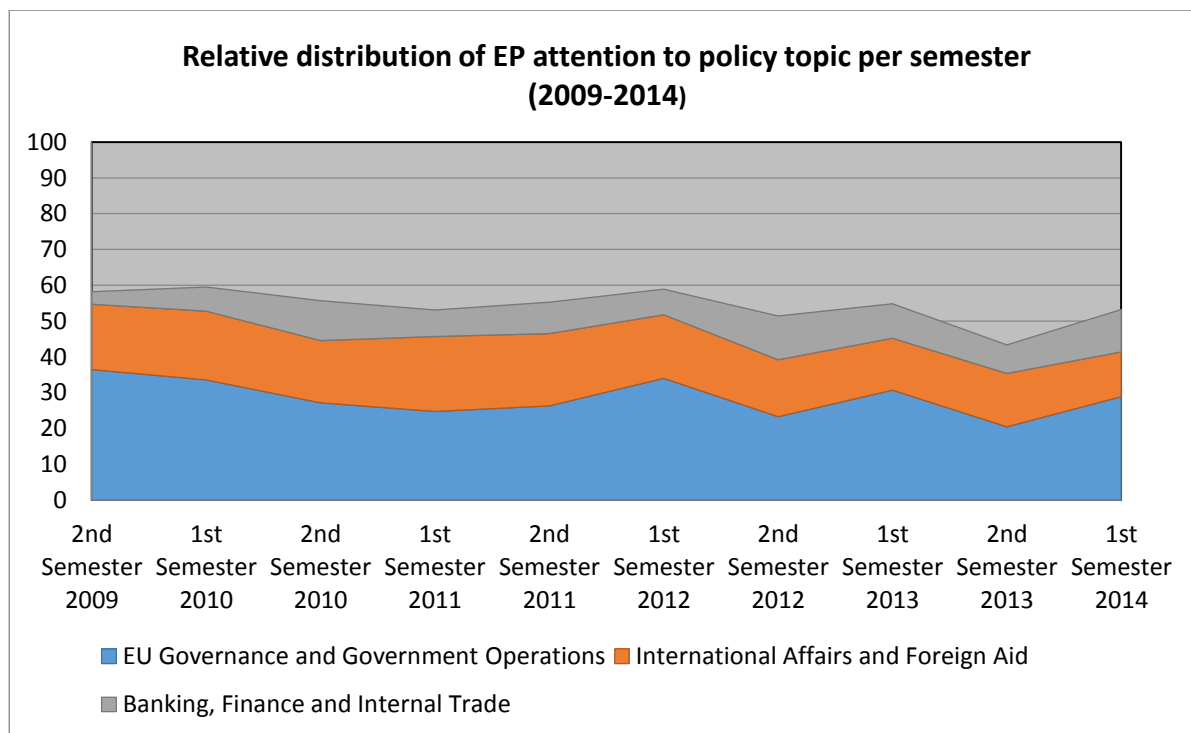


Figure 4 presents the same statistic, i.e. the cumulated frequency of the three top issues, but looking at each plenary session held by the European Parliament. Interestingly, a far wider degree

of variation emerges: there are in fact single sessions where these three core topics – EU governance, international affairs and banking/finance – together cover less than 40% of the plenary agenda, while in other sessions (e.g. October 2010, May 2012 or April 2013) they easily reach an astonishing 80% of total agenda space.

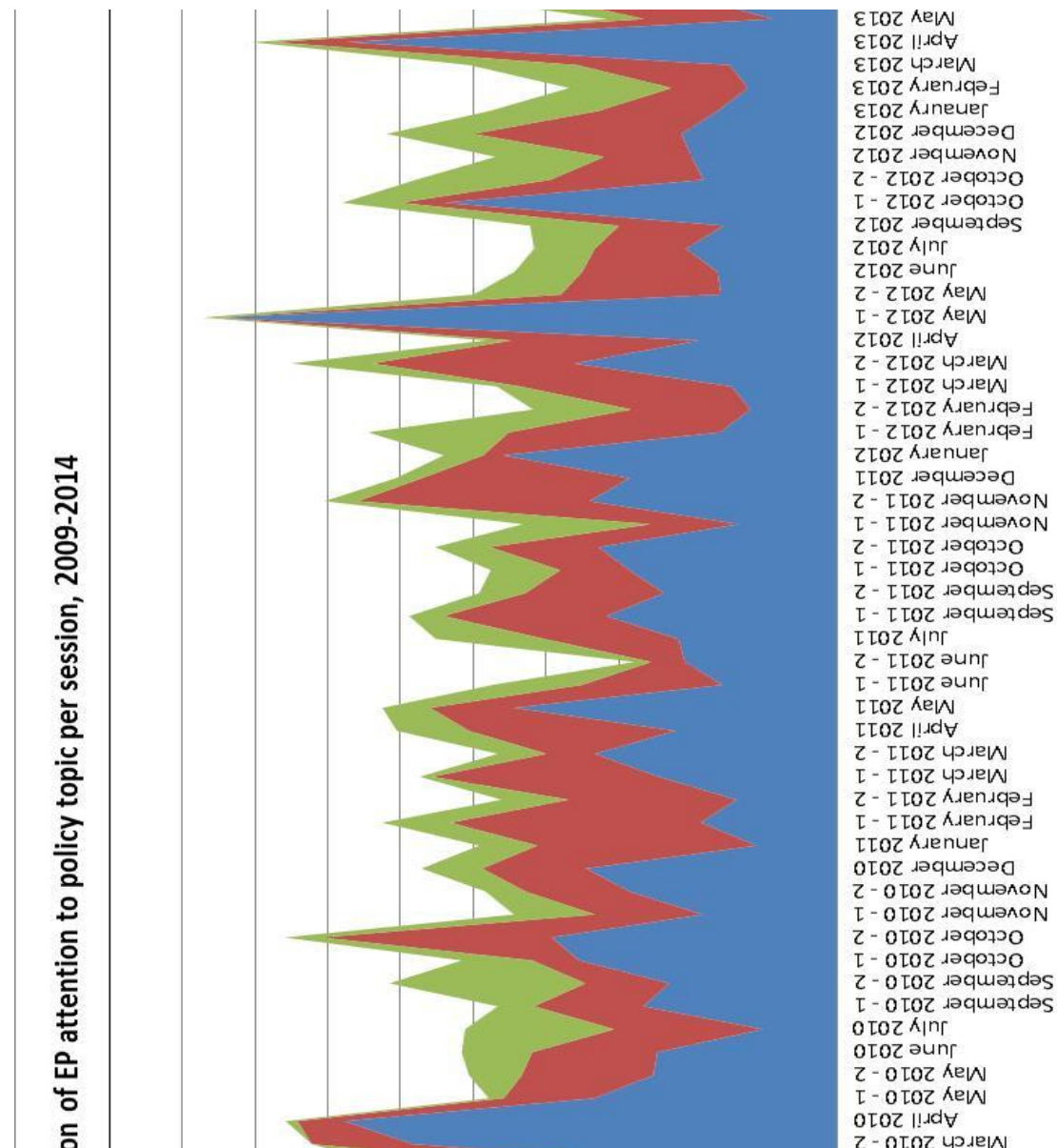


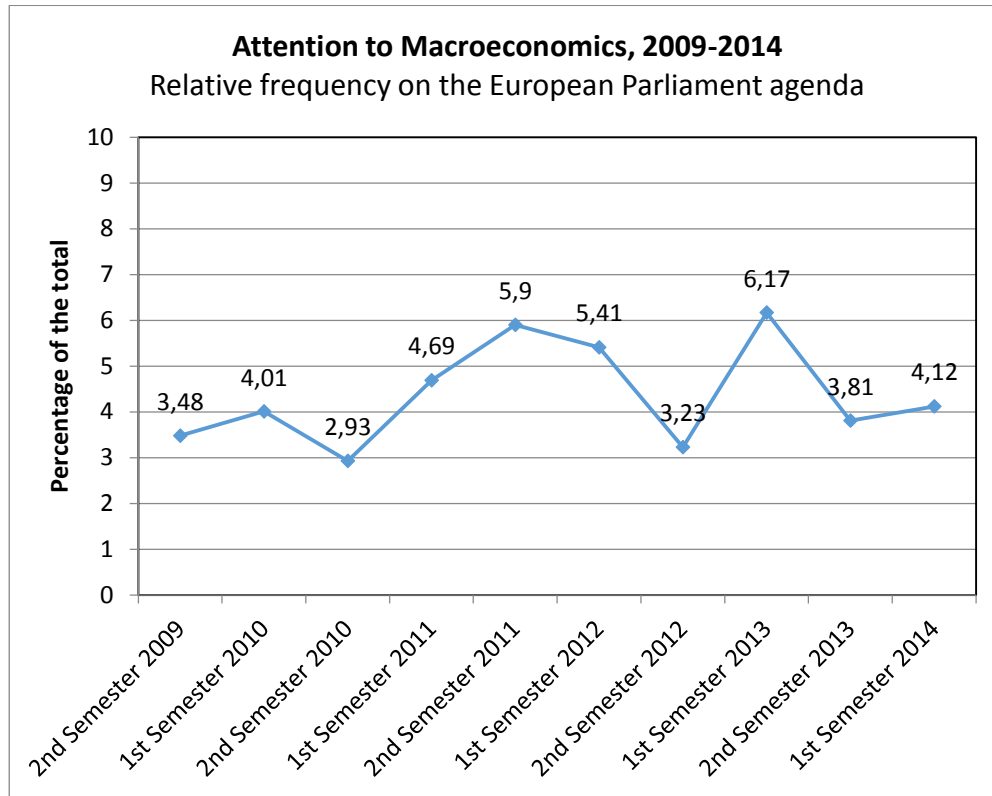
Figure 4. Relative distribution of EP attention to core topics per session, 2009-2014

4.1.2 Attention to economic issues in the European Parliament

In order to better enlighten how the European Parliament reacted to the economic and financial crisis starting from 2009 (the year of its 7th direct election by European citizens), we will now take a closer look at its specific attention to the policy area related to macroeconomics, as well as the subtopics under this category. As we have already seen, a preliminary observation is that economic issues is not part of the top-ranking three policy areas consistently highest on the EP agenda. As the following figure show, its relative frequency on a semester basis varies between less than 3% and slightly above 6%, hence never enjoying a clear-cut priority on plenary agendas. Nevertheless, a session-on-session analysis again highlights a far wider variation, with occasions when macroeconomic issues alone covered almost 30% of the agenda (Figure 6); in 8 sessions out

of 73 macroeconomics exceeded 10% of relative frequency and it is even possible to notice that during 13 of its sessions the EP did not deal with this policy area at all.

Figure 5. Relative frequency of macroeconomic issues on the EP agenda per semester, 2009-2014



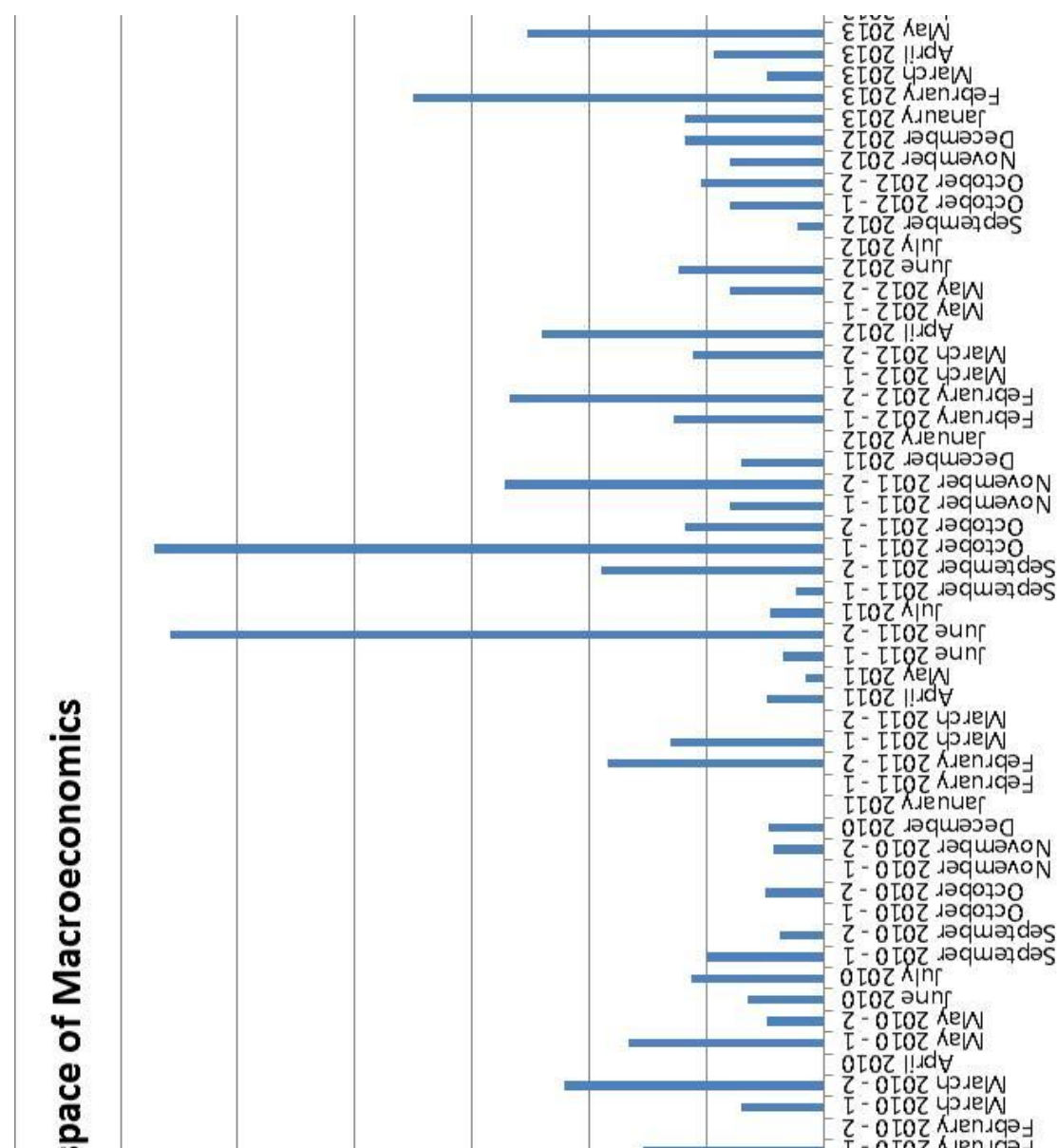


Figure 6. Relative frequency of macroeconomic issues on the EP agenda per session, 2009-2014

After acknowledging that the attention of the EP to economic issues, in terms of agenda space, has not been particularly high during the 7th term, we now assess which of the specific issues under this wide umbrella were mostly tackled by the European Parliament. On average during the 2009-2014 period, general macroeconomic issues were given the highest attention with over 40% of economy-related agenda space, but other important areas have been taxation and monetary issues (including the role of the ECB), as Table 2 illustrates.

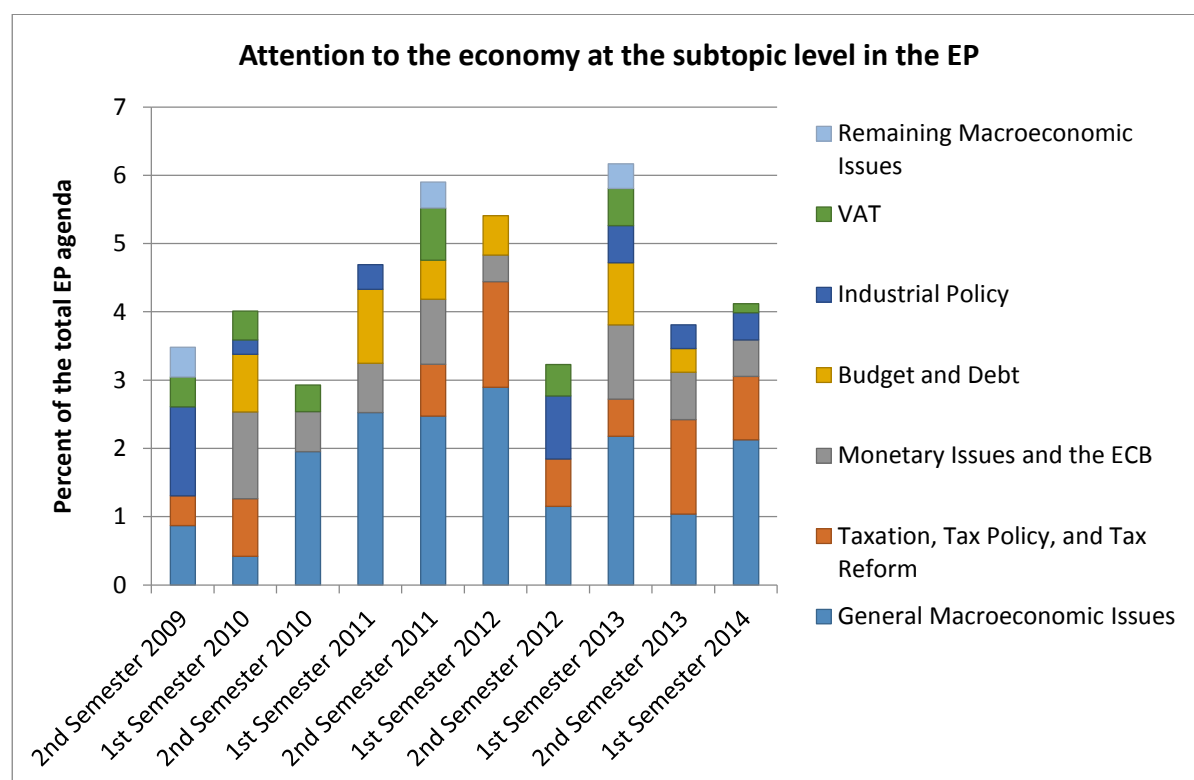
Table 2. Attention to economic issues at the subtopic level in the EP, 2009-2014

Subtopics in the Macroeconomics policy field	Percentage
General Macroeconomic Issues	41.67%
Taxation, Tax Policy, and Tax Reform	16.67%
Monetary Issues and the ECB	14.91%

Budget and Debt	10.09%
Industrial Policy	7.89%
VAT	6.58%
<i>Remaining Macroeconomic Issues</i>	<i>2.19%</i>

As usual, taking a closer look at the different semesters permits to interpret the changes in attention to the single particular topics. Although changes are very limited on an absolute scale – they all occurred within less than 6% of the total agenda – we can see that not all issues were covered by the European Parliament each semester. For example, taxation was not present on the EP plenary agendas for an entire year, between mid-2010 and mid-2011, while general issues consistently build up the bulk of the agenda space devoted to economic affairs. VAT issues were similarly not dealt with in 3 out of 10 semesters, as was the case for industrial policy issues, present only in seven instances. Of course a session-based analysis would reveal even more interesting things, but we thought it dispersive to repeat this kind of breakdown for each of the 73 plenary sessions under examination.

Figure 7. Attention to economic issues at the subtopic level in the EP, 2009-2014



4.2 The agenda of the European Council (2009-2014)

4.2.1 Composition and dynamics of EUCO Conclusions

Our analysis of European Council Conclusions over the period 2009-2014 confirms the results of scholarly research, which has found a limited number of core topics of government to account for about half of EUCO's agenda. In particular, Alexandrova et al. found that the three policy areas of international affairs, macroeconomics and governance are consistently ranking highest among EU Heads of State and Government's concerns, at least in a pooled analysis of the whole 1975-2010 period (i.e. since the European Council was formally established, at the 1974 Fontainebleau summit). Foreign affairs have traditionally covered almost a quarter of EUCO's agenda, macroeconomics about 15% and governance/government operations around 10% (Alexandrova et al. 2012a, Alexandrova et al. 2014a). Our results for the last five years, however, highlight a partially different pattern, with quite substantial differences in the percentage of attention devoted to the main policy areas. Table 3 shows the allocation of attention to policy areas over the last five years, with the two top fields being macroeconomics and international affairs; banking, finance and internal trade surpassed governance and reached the third place (with double the relative frequency this policy area has over the whole 1975-2010 time span).

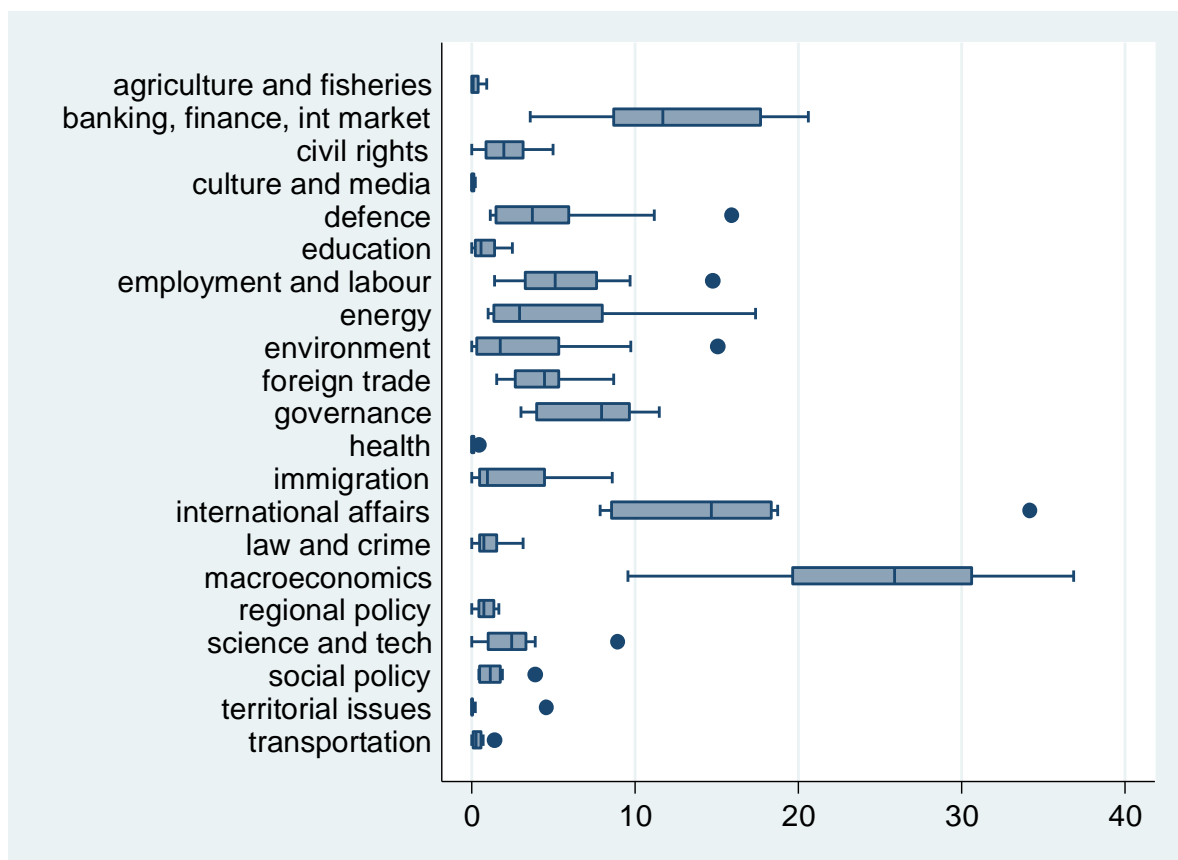
Table 3. Aggregated attention to policy fields in EUCO, 2009-2014

Policy field	Frequency	Percentage
Macroeconomics	1682	25.16%
International Affairs and Foreign Aid	1012	15.13%
Banking, Finance and Internal Trade	822	12.29%
EU Governance and Government Operations	469	7.01%
Employment	399	5.97%
Energy	332	4.96%
Defence	323	4.83%
Environment	282	4.22%
Foreign Trade	277	4.14%
Immigration	247	3.69%
Remaining 11 policy fields (less than 3% each)	843	12.61%
<i>All</i>	<i>6689</i>	<i>100.00%</i>

Even if no low-ranking policy area – such as for example education, health or social policy - has managed to reach the top of the agenda, we see that economic issues gained the first place in EU leaders' attention, with 25% of the total agenda space, hence an entire 10% more agenda space than in the pooled study of the last 40 years. This is hardly shocking when one considers the pivotal role played by this institution in the management of the economic and financial crisis, and the numerous deal-breaking decisions it has made on how to reinforce the EMU's architecture, as well as on the financial assistance granted to crisis-ridden countries. On the other hand,

international affairs have covered only 15% of the agenda space (compared with 24% over the whole history of EUCO), clearly indicating that foreign affairs lost their privileged position in EU leaders' Conclusions, failing to represent their primary concern over the very last years. EU governance and government operations lost the third place, but its relative frequency is not enormously lower, with 7% compared to 10% in the pooled 1975-2010 analysis. Nonetheless, it was surpassed by banking/financial issues, which is also hardly surprising as a result given the extensive efforts made at EU level to reinforce financial markets' and banking institutions' regulation. Employment-related issues also received 6% of agenda space, a degree of attention probably linked to the harsh effects of the crisis on the real economy in most Member States.

Figure 8. EUCO Attention to all topics on the agenda per semester within the period 2009-2014

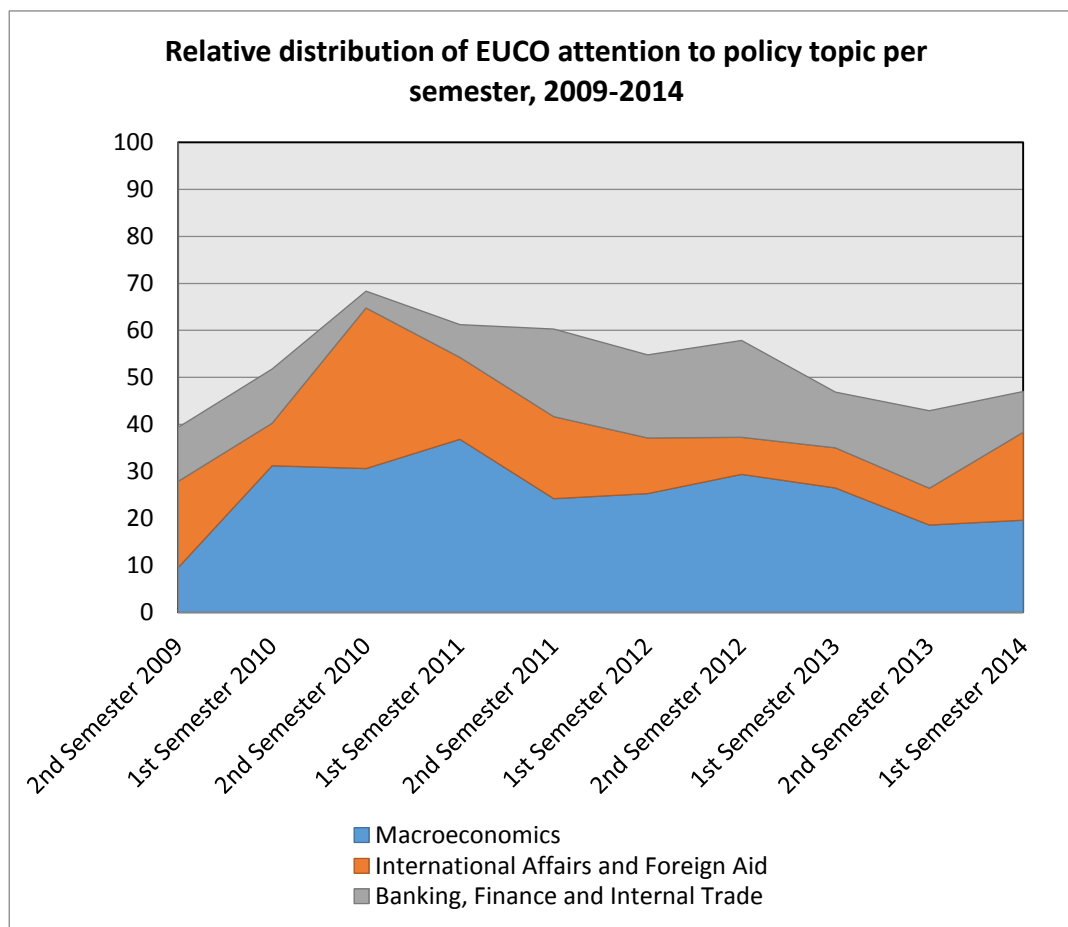


The boxplots displaying the relative frequency of each of the 21 policy areas on a semester basis reveal interesting additional information, especially if compared to the same graph built with EP plenaries' data (Figure 2). The variation in the degree of attention devoted to each policy area is indeed much higher than in the case of the European Parliament, effectively mirroring the different nature and functions of the two institutions. The European Council Conclusions are of course a document entirely different in structure (and purpose) from EP plenary agendas, but they can be taken as a sensible proxy for its activity. The European Council, playing the role of an agenda-setter which establishes *à la fois* priorities and dimensions of the integration process, enjoys an almost unlimited flexibility in its freedom to choose which matters to deal with, while the agenda of the European Parliament is a document with a much more structured format, in view of the institution's legislative, supervisory and budgetary powers and of its established Rules

of Procedure. The areas displaying a wider degree of variation in their relative frequency are those at the top of the agenda, particularly macroeconomics which has a minimum of 10% and a maximum of almost 40% of the agenda space on a semester basis. Degrees of variation in attention of almost 20 percentage points can be similarly seen for banking, financial and single market issues as well as for the area of energy; several others policy areas (e.g. defense, employment, environment, international affairs) also display a 10 percentage points difference in their minimum/maximum agenda space on a semester basis. These findings reflect not only the institution's responsibilities and powers, but also the fact that the European Council often convenes special or informal meetings entirely devoted to specific issues.

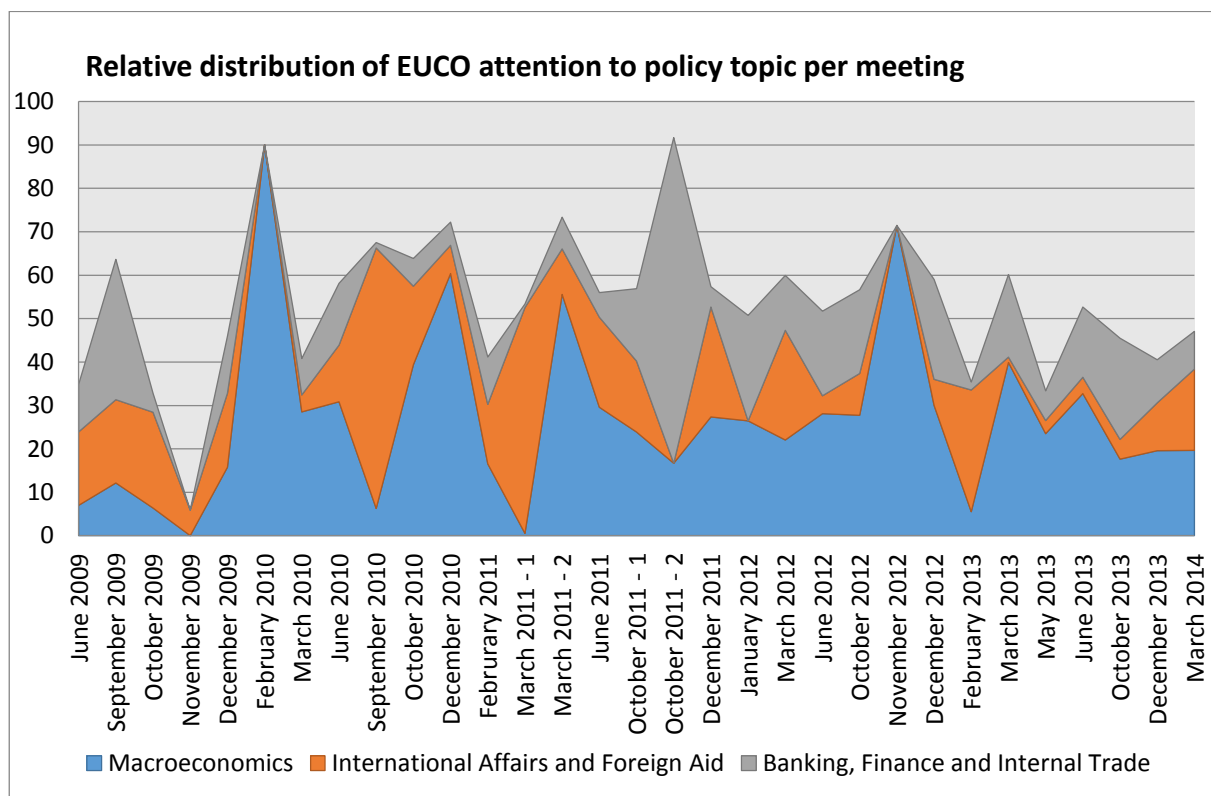
The three core topics in EUCO Conclusions over the 2009-2014 period together account for almost half of its agenda, but some variation in their cumulative relative frequency is visible when we look at data on a semester basis (Figure 9), showing that these policy areas taken together covered a minimum of 40% (2nd Semester 2009) and a maximum of almost 70% (2nd Semester 2010) of total agenda space. Once again if we enlarge our study with a qualitative analysis in order to investigate the reasons behind this variation, it is easy to recall that the months from July to December 2010 were characterized by important advancements in crisis management, with e.g. the creation of a task force on economic governance and the establishment of the permanent European Stability Mechanism.

Figure 9. Relative distribution of EUCO attention to core topics per semester, 2009-2014



If we proceed to breakdown the data on a meeting-per-meeting basis, we find an astonishing degree of variation in the relative proportion of macroeconomic, international affairs and banking/finance issues, underlining several instances where one of these policy areas alone accounted for 60-80% of the total agenda, as was the case for purpose-specific meetings. Looking at Figure 10, we can easily see that the February 2010 meeting was entirely devoted to economic issues; it was indeed the occasion where a first assistance loan for Greece was agreed upon. A similar pattern emerges for December 2010, the summit when the decision to establish a permanent European Stability Mechanism was taken; in November 2012 the meeting was an informal one convened to untangle the negotiations around the 2014-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework. Conversely, international affairs was the dominant topic in September 2010, dedicated to the strategic orientations of the EU's external policy, as well as in the first March 2011 meeting, which was devoted to the 'Arab Springs', i.e. the democratic transitions in the Southern Neighbourhood countries. As for banking, finance and internal trade, the only summit when this policy areas was preponderant is the second one in October 2011, when EU Heads of State and Governments concentrated on euro area governance, the Greek crisis, and stabilization mechanisms for the banking sector.

Figure 10. Relative distribution of EUCO attention to core topics per meeting, 2009-2014



4.2.2 Attention to economic issues in the European Council

In comparison with the European Parliament, it is apparent that the European Council devoted a consistently higher degree of attention economic issues, covering a good quarter of its agenda space on average. When we look at data on a semester basis (Figure 11), there is some variation

between the minimum coverage (less than 10% in the second semester of 2009) and the maximum one, more than 35% in the first semester of 2010. As usual, breaking down the data by meeting allows us to better identify the dynamics of attention to economic affairs in this institution: Figure 12 replicates somehow the findings of Figure 10 but concentrating on this single policy area gives us a clearer view of the enormous degree of variation in attention (and agenda space) that EU leaders devoted to economic issues, ranging from no attention at all (November 2009) to an astonishing 90% of the agenda in February 2010.

Figure 11. Relative frequency of macroeconomic issues on EUCO agenda per semester, 2009-2014

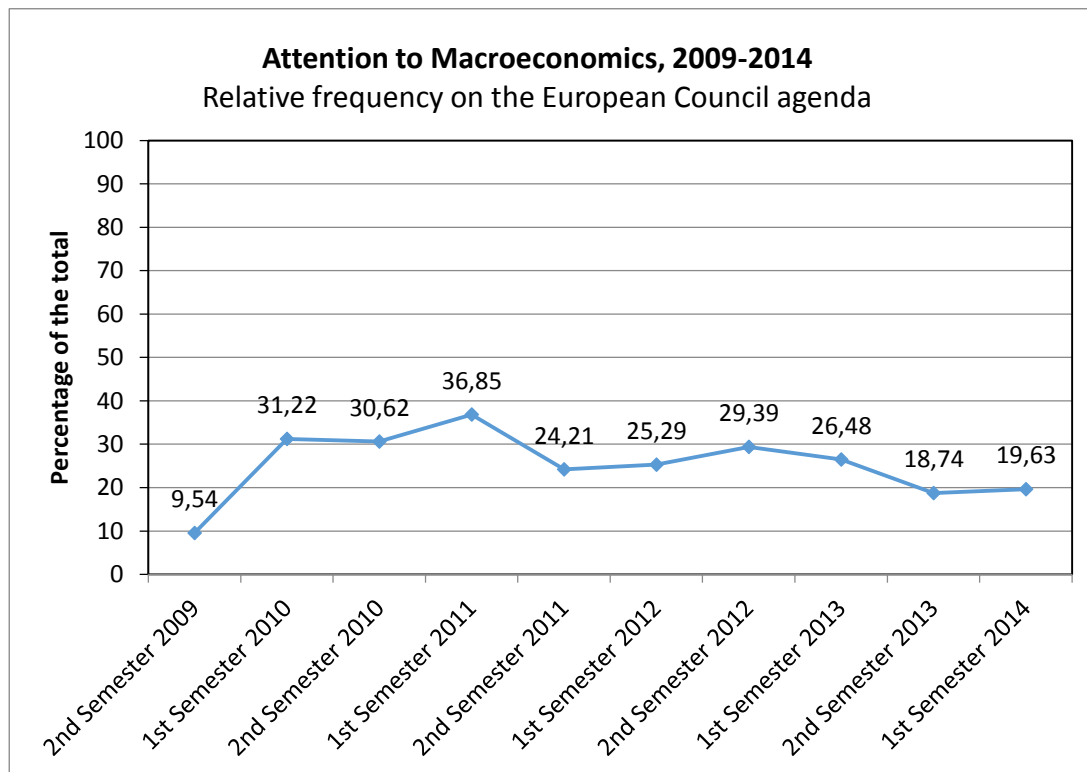
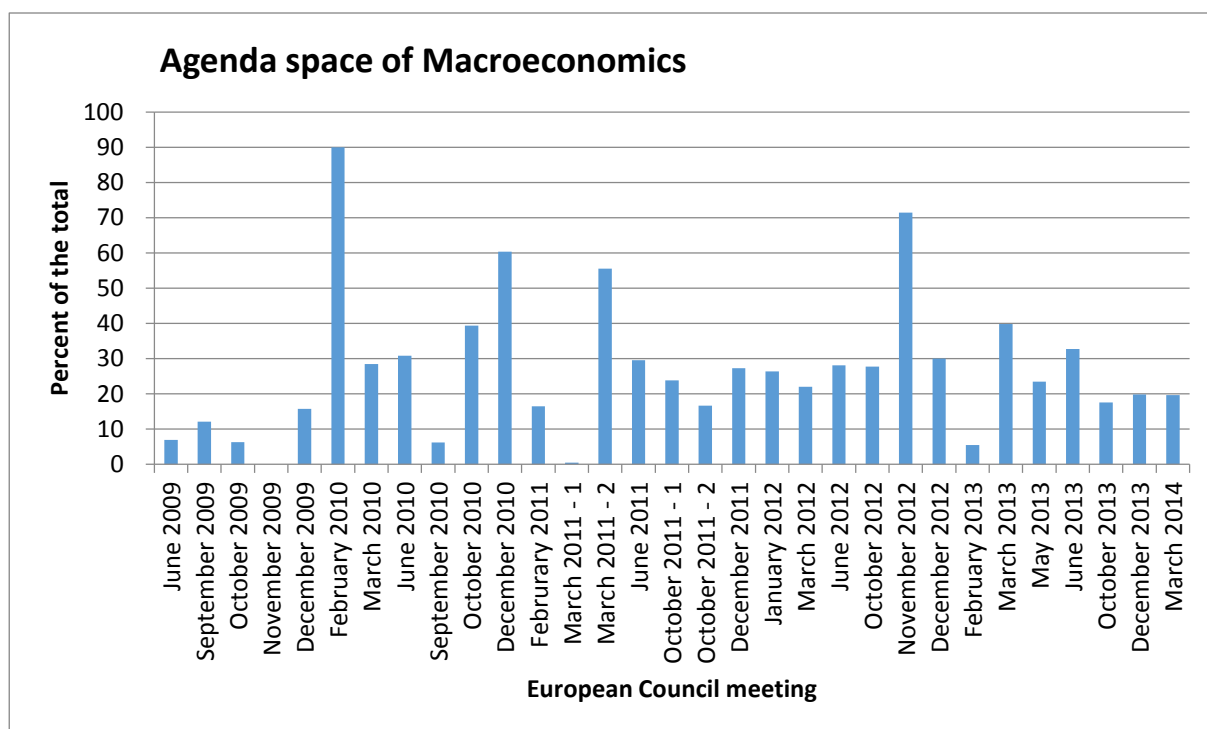


Figure 12. Relative frequency of macroeconomic issues on EUCO agenda per session, 2009-2014



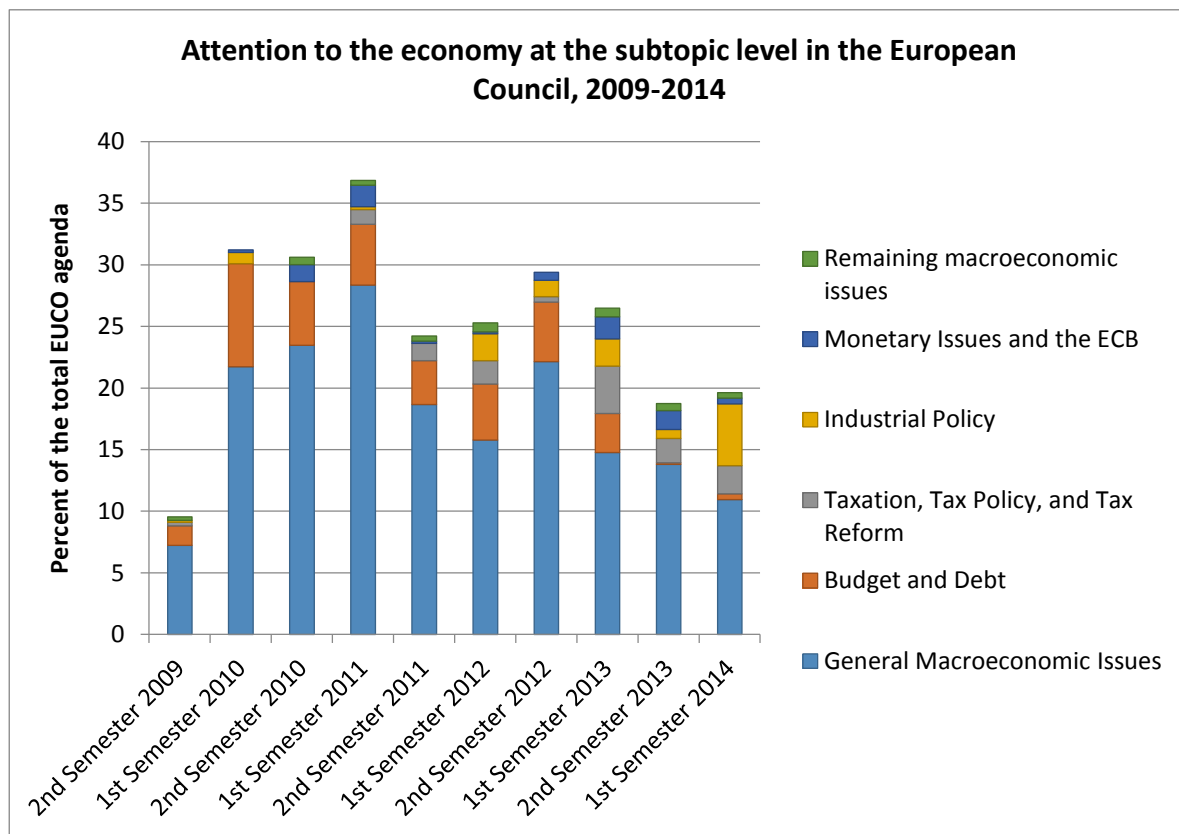
If we look specifically at the relative saliency of single subtopics within the macroeconomics policy area for EUCO Conclusions, it is self-evident that most of the times EU leaders discussed about general economic issues, yet the agenda share taken up by budget and debt mirrors the huge concern of this intergovernmental forum about the sustainability of public finances, and the decisions taken to reinforce the Stability and Growth Pact by tightening its fiscal rules. In comparison with the European Parliament, whose agenda shows a higher focus on very well determined issues, the European Council debated the economic and financial crisis mostly in general terms. EUCO Conclusions are indeed very often formulated in a very vague and elusive way, and it is not among the European Council's responsibilities to formulate precise policy initiatives.

Table 4. Attention to economic issues at the subtopic level in EUCO, 2009-2014

Subtopics in the Macroeconomics policy field	Percentage
General Macroeconomic Issues	71.40%
Budget and Debt	14.39%
Taxation, Tax Policy, and Tax Reform	5.23%
Industrial Policy	3.69%
Monetary Issues and the ECB	3.63%
<i>Remaining Macroeconomic Issues</i>	<i>1.67%</i>

Investigating the specific pattern of attention to economic affairs for each of the ten semesters in the analysed period (Figure 13), we still find that general references to the economic situation were most frequent, while most of the other topics enjoyed a rather stable, yet limited, percentage of the total agenda space. Some issues were totally neglected in some semesters, but the most interesting finding is perhaps that budget/debt issues, which covered almost 10% of the total economy-related agenda in 2010 and early 2011, almost disappeared during the last year or so, reflecting the apparent ‘calm’ situation after the worst phases of the sovereign debt crisis and the loss of attention to fiscal-related issues.

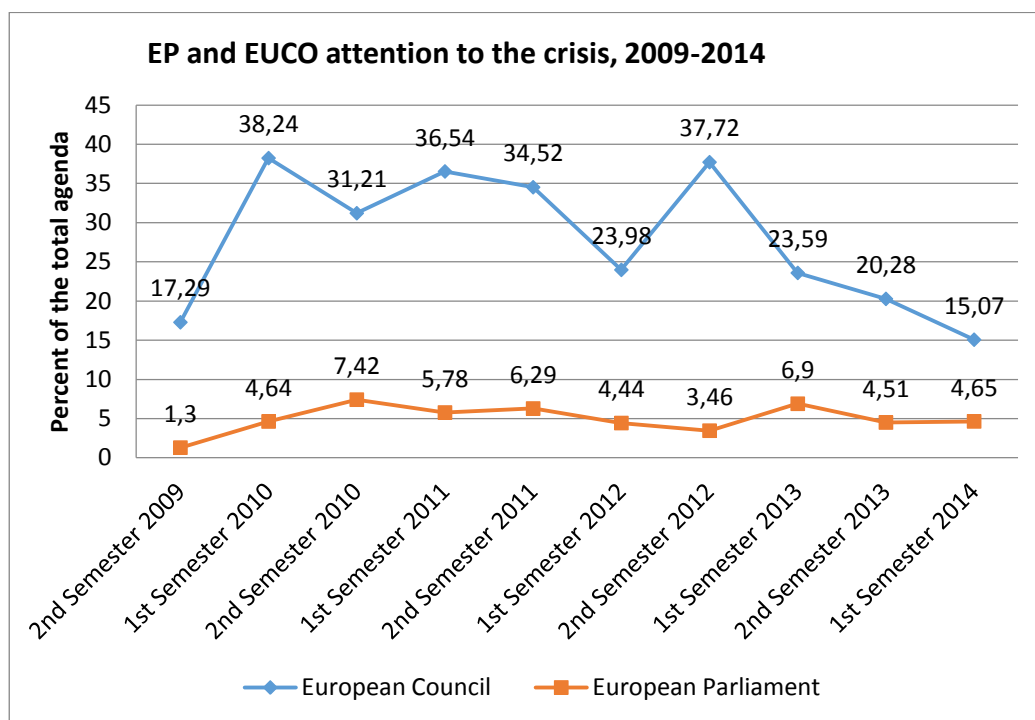
Figure 13. Attention to economic issues at the subtopic level in EUCO, 2009-2014



5. A comparison between the European Parliament and European Council: attention to the economic and financial crisis

Aiming to compare directly the two institutions’ response to the economic and financial crisis, we constructed a new variable to account for the policy subtopics specifically related to it. In order to do this, we clustered together some of the policy areas coded in the EU Policy Agendas Project codebook under the two umbrellas of macroeconomics and banking, finance and internal market issues. In particular, we grouped the following (and directly crisis-related) subtopics: general macroeconomic issues, unemployment rate, monetary issues and the ECB, banking system and financial institution regulation, financial market regulation.

Figure 16. European Parliament and European Council attention to the crisis



By plotting together the relative frequency of this fictional variable, which is used as a proxy for attention to the crisis, for both institutions on a semester basis, we can still detect a considerably lower portion of agenda space devoted to these issues by the EP in comparison with the European Council, as emerged already in the previous paragraphs. EUCO's attention to the crisis indeed varied among 20% and almost 40% of the whole agenda, while the EP's attention never exceeded the 10% limit, with a much more stable pattern over time.

6. Conclusions

Our quantitative analysis shows that the European Council devoted large part of its agenda in solving the economic and financial crisis by extensively dealing with the related problems as well as the measures to take, while the European Parliament only dedicated a very limited part of its agenda to crisis-related issues and measures.

It might well be possible that the economic and financial crisis reinforced the role of the European Council and contributed to its image as a powerful engine of European integration, while the EP has not been granted a substantial increase in power, nor has it gained a major role in the newly reformed system of macroeconomic coordination. However, these results could be also explained referring to the different structure of the documents under analysis, and the almost unrestrained flexibility of European Council Conclusions in relation to the almost fixed structure of European Parliament agenda¹. The draft agenda of each plenary session is in fact drawn up by the Conference of Presidents of the political groups, taking in consideration both the

¹ Concerning the latter, a 7 percent range of attention change (minimum-maximum) is in fact far from negligible when one takes into account the institutional hurdles political actors (be it parties or single MEPs) face in order to change or influence the agenda of plenary sessions.

recommendations of the Conference of Committee Chairs and the Commission's work programme². Therefore, the policy and legislative calendars of the committees' work and of the European Commission are the main basis for building the European Parliament's agenda, which is directly linked to the activities of its specialized subunits as well as to the Commissioners' initiatives³. Therefore, individual MEPs have little influence on the construction of the agenda of the European Parliament⁴. Furthermore, the EP has a limited ability to react to urgent matters: the main instrument the EP has to react to major current events is the opening speech of the Parliament's President, which allows him to respond to the latest developments on any major issue, often calling the Commission to act (and submit policy proposals) in a given area.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that the policy agendas methodology has been adopted for its usefulness in assessing attention patterns and dynamics, yet it fails to capture features of a qualitative nature such as the different powers of the institutions. In this case, this approach of course must be complemented by additional viewpoints in order to account for the fundamental role held by the EP in crisis management and EMU reform, particularly in view of the key legislative measures which it passed in plenary as a co-legislator and which contributed crucially to reinforcing the economic governance and financial regulation architecture of the European Union.

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² 'Rule 137: Draft agenda 1. Before each part-session the draft agenda shall be drawn up by the Conference of Presidents on the basis of recommendations by the Conference of Committee Chairs taking into account the agreed Commission Work Programme referred to in Rule 35. The Commission and the Council may, at the invitation of the President attend the deliberations of the Conference of Presidents on the draft agenda. 2. The draft agenda may indicate voting times for certain items down for consideration. 3. One or two periods, together totalling a maximum of 60 minutes, may be set aside in the draft agenda for debates on cases of breaches of human rights, democracy and the rule of law pursuant to Rule 122. 4. The final draft agenda shall be distributed to Members at least three hours before the beginning of the part-session.' <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+RULES-EP+20140310+RULE-137+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN&navigationBar=YES>

³ The rigidity of the plenary agenda derives from the high institutional hurdles inherent in its modification: according to Rule 140, amendments on the final draft agenda may be proposed by a committee, a political group or a group of at least 40 MEPs and must be voted in plenary.

⁴ 'Rule 140 : Adopting and amending the agenda 1. At the beginning of each part-session, Parliament shall take a decision on the final draft agenda. Amendments may be proposed by a committee, a political group or at least 40 Members. Any such proposals must be received by the President at least one hour before the opening of the part-session. The President may give the floor to the mover, one speaker in favour and one speaker against, in each case for not more than one minute. 2. Once adopted, the agenda may not be amended, except in pursuance of Rules 142 or 174 to 178 or on a proposal from the President. If a procedural motion to amend the agenda is rejected, it may not be tabled again during the same part-session. 3. Before closing the sitting, the President shall announce the date, time and agenda of the next sitting.' <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+RULES-EP+20140310+RULE-140+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN&navigationBar=YES>

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