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Expertise, turnover and refreshment within the committees of the European Parliament: as much like Sisyphus pushing the boulder up the mountain as we may think?

David A. Alexander 

Affiliate Researcher, School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

ABSTRACT

Expertise is a resource, which parliamentary committees organise to support the legislative work of their plenaries. Informational theories posit that expertise is gained from time spent on committee, so how does the committee system of the European Parliament (EP) react to high levels of membership turnover? Using qualitative interview evidence and CV data, this paper explores how expertise is utilised within the EP's committee system and provides some alternative accounts of its usage. This paper demonstrates that membership turnover, an inevitability of democratic legislatures and perceived as detrimental to committees from the loss of experienced policymakers, can have potentially positive benefits. I find that turnover can not only refresh the observed committees' institutional relationships but also clear away potential deadwood that is manifested as members who are past their policymaking primes. I argue that an injection of new blood is a resource that EP committees utilise to help maintain relevance.

KEYWORDS

European Parliament; committee systems; expertise; committee refreshment; legislator turnover

Introduction

Information is a commodity, which can equate to influence – the more possessed, the greater potential ability to draw an outcome towards a preference. Information in the form of collective membership expertise within the committee system of the European Parliament (EP) has, however, been considered as something akin to Sisyphus endlessly pushing his boulder up the mountain. Each day he would push it to the top only to see it return to the bottom again, repeating the struggle eternally. EP committees build expertise over time, only to see it mitigated at each election due to high membership turnover. While not reaching the bottom of the mountain, due to some Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) being retained on committee, or officials providing continuity, the boulder of collective committee expertise has rolled back nonetheless and needs to be pushed back up the mountain from a lower point, until the next election when the process begins again. Through a qualitative analysis of three committees centred on the 7th (2009–2014) and transition into the 8th (2014–2019) term, this paper asks how do

CONTACT David A. Alexander  David.Alexander@glasgow.ac.uk  Affiliate Researcher, School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

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EP committees react to rapid membership turnover? I look critically at some of the commonly held assumptions over how committees organise the expertise of members as a resource and how this is, potentially, mitigated by membership turnover.

The desire of legislatures to constrain well-resourced executives, coupled with ever-increasing complexities of policymaking, necessitates legislator specialisation to establish and maintain meaningful participation in decision-making (Strøm 1998). An ineffective or inefficient participation from legislators would undermine the quality of democracy in a polity and raise questions over the legitimacy of legislative action (Judge and Leston-Bandeira 2021) – a concern often emerging within the context of the European integration project. By dividing the myriad of policy realms into manageable subunits, with the empowerment of specialised committees, legislatures can operate with greater efficiency. Due to this function as agent, committees frequently become the main decision-making conduit through which legislators attempt to exercise influence (Strøm 1998). A committee's ability to organise information and what factors impact this, such as turnover, will, however, define the capacity of the legislature to influence policy and its effectiveness vis-à-vis executives (Gilligan and Krehbiel 1990). The committees of the EP have established themselves as supporters of the informational capacity, which the plenary requires, supplying information to facilitate the legislature's ability to influence policy and scrutinise executives (Bowler and Farrell 1995; Whitaker 2011; Jensen and Winzen 2012; Burns 2013a). The committee system's ability to support the plenary, as a utility, is, however, seemingly under fulfilled for extended periods, with possible negative consequences for the Parliament's standing and the ability of its political groupings to achieve their policy goals, due to high member turnover (Daniel 2013).

The assumed connection between expertise and membership turnover is well summarised by Mamadouh and Raunio (2003, 349):

The development of policy expertise is facilitated when representatives serve on the same committee for an extended time-period. Considering the very high turnover of MEPs, the membership of committees' changes significantly after each election, and this may weaken the legislative influence of the Parliament.

While Mamadouh and Raunio were careful not to make any bold claims about a confirmed connection, the mitigating impact of turnover upon committees and their reduced ability to support the expert capacity of the legislature, is often assumed nevertheless and repeated to various degrees in the context of the EP and within comparative perspectives of legislatures (Shaw 1998; Benedetto 2005; Daniel 2013; Makse 2017). It is a statement given extra weight when reminded of the significant turnover that the EP regularly experiences (Treib and Schlipphak 2019). I argue, however, that as time has progressed, this premise may not fully explain the summative effect of membership turnover upon the subsequent ability of EP committees to support the Parliament. Alongside understanding upon the different expert cultures that have developed in specific committee contexts, I offer some novel accounts which find that the refreshment of a committee with an injection of new blood is being utilised as a positive resource. While seniority is still important, membership turnover benefits the observed committees in vital ways, revitalising relationships, providing a prospective environment for a continuing stream of policy solutions, and cultivating flexible expert perspectives.

Initially, a review is undertaken to determine current understanding of expertise, how it is operationalised in this study, and the anticipated effects of turnover. After a discussion upon the research design and qualitative approach, data, drawn from the three cases, is presented. A final discussion brings together the findings, emphasising their implications for existing knowledge.

Committees of the European Parliament

The committees are, to use the well-worn quote, the ‘legislative backbone’ of the Parliament (Westlake 1994, 191). During this paper’s timeframe, the EP contained 20 permanent committees, 2 subcommittees and several temporary special committees. Each of the permanent committees have a defined competency set for at least a parliamentary term. According to Daniel (2013) ‘this relatively high number of standing committees permits organisation around a set of fairly specific legislative topics.’ MEPs are assigned a committee seat at the start of the term, with potential reassignment at the mid-term point, and a position as substitute on, usually, one other committee, allowing members to specialise. While not reaching the same pinnacle as some national committee systems, lacking formal legislative initiation powers, EP committees are crucial legislative participants within the EU decision-making process (Benedetto 2005; McElroy 2006; Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton 2007; Settembri and Neuhold 2009; Whitaker 2011; Yordanova 2013; Daniel and Thierse 2018).

Once the EP receives a proposal, a single committee is assigned the responsibility for drafting a response. The committee will nominate a member as Rapporteur with mandate to draft a position and lead informal negotiations with Council and Commission. The position that the committee adopts is significant as, predominately, it will constitute what is adopted by the plenary (Ringe 2010; Costello and Thomson 2010; Burns 2013a). EP committees engage with debate upon legislative proposals in the first instance, with plenary only becoming involved once committee has reached a position upon proposed amendments and negotiated compromise with the Council, which constitute a starting point for the plenary. This is significant, as committee preceding plenary involvement, during decision-making, is a comparative signifier of an important committee system, as the committee possesses an agenda-setting function (Strøm 1998). Deviation by the plenary, upon the committee position, risks voiding compromises negotiated between the committee and Council during dialogue (Obholzer and Reh 2012). The prevalence of first reading agreements additionally limits the chance of drift from the committee’s position (at the expense of the increased empowerment of the Rapporteur compared to the average committee member) (Costello and Thomson 2010).

Collectively the committees possess the most direct understanding within their policy remits, having an informational advantage over the plenary. Due to this specialised culture, function as informational repository and position as initial actor, the committees ‘play a crucial role in shaping final legislative outcomes under co-decision and can use their policy expertise to inform the plenary and thereby hold the executive to account’ (Burns 2013a, 988). The EP is dependent upon its committees to handle efficiently its ever-expanding legislative workload, which increased significantly post Treaty of Lisbon (ToL) (Dinan 2014). However, the successful nature of this dependent relationship is reliant upon the committee system’s ability to organise information and support the Parliament’s capacity to participate.

Committee informational organisation

Within this paper, I employ the informational model of legislative organisation, developed originally from the US Congress (Gilligan and Krehbiel 1989, 1990; Krehbiel 1991). The informational approach has been deployed frequently in the context of the EP, due to the value attributed to informational resources within the Parliament (Kaeding 2004; McElroy 2006; Costello and Thomson 2010; Hermansen 2018). While evidence exists that some committees contain a proportion of high demanders (see Yordanova 2009), in general the EP's committees have been viewed as reflective of the plenary in microcosm and organised to be predominantly consensual in decision-making, especially within areas of substantive EP policy involvement, which incentivises the organisation of committees around specialisation for the purpose of supporting Parliament's position (McElroy 2006; Costello and Thomson 2010; Burns 2013b; Hermansen 2018).

Legislators strive to acquire information (as expertise) to mitigate undesirable fallout after a policy's promulgation, as negative unforeseen consequences can undercut claims of legitimacy, which are supported by competent decision-making (Gilligan and Krehbiel 1990). Legislative committees are organised as conduits to facilitate the inexpensive collection of information, due to a division of labour upon specific areas attracting members with interests or experience who can specialise at low cost (Krehbiel 1991). Substantial resources of information, once accumulated in committee, can be utilised to influence outcomes, by their deployment when judged appropriate during strategic bargaining, and, if one exists, by exploitation of an asymmetrical informational advantage (Gilligan and Krehbiel 1989). An advantage in information allows legislators to influence the parameters of policy-choice, constraining or expanding the options available. A committee system with significant resources of expertise should benefit the legislature's summative legislative capacity vis-à-vis executives (Krehbiel 2004). However, while it has sometimes been treated as such, expertise is not a monolithic entity, rather it can be manifest in two non-exclusive distinct forms – 'political' and 'technical' (Krehbiel 1991, 67), which I define for clarity as 'policymaking expertise' (political) and 'professional expertise' (technical).

Policymaking expertise is the collection of information resulting from experience acquired through the process of making policy and developing an understanding upon the complexities of the legislative system (Kaeding 2004; Daniel 2013; Hermansen 2018). Learning from experience the scope of preferences and what is acceptable to other legislative participants possessing veto powers, amendment rights, or whose support is required to realise a consensus, enables legislators to develop an institutional memory of what is achievable and, with greater accuracy, how far to push negotiating partners. This process of institutional learning and understanding the limitations of different policy options should only occur over time with greater institutional experience and the cultivation of relationships for informational exchange and preference learning (Frech 2016). The more experience a legislator retains of the political process, the more 'legislative leverage' they should possess (Frech 2016, 74). Policymaking expertise is, however, often described in area-specific terms (Mickler 2013) – it is gained by working within a committee over time and, by extension, seemingly lacking pertinence to another committee's operations

(Makse 2017; Hermansen 2018). Policymaking expertise is, therefore, operationalised as the level of 'seniority' a member has in a committee, i.e. the physical 'time' (years) a member has spent working within a single committee.

Professional expertise is the technical specialisation, which members obtain from a professional or training background, acquired prior to joining a committee (Daniel and Thierse 2018). Professional expertise is the operationalisation within this paper of technical expertise and is recorded as the rate and relevance of professional experience to a committee's remit, e.g. an Agriculture and Rural Development Committee member with a degree in agricultural management. Possessing technical specialisation will inform actors of different policy options not apparent to non-specialists (Sabatier and Whiteman 1985). Legislators with a professional or educational background should possess their own networks to collect information, not readily accessible to non-experts, enabling them to develop this variety of policy choice and apply their knowledge, as recognised expert, to develop consensus upon technical solutions (Daniel 2013). Interested members, lacking a relevant technical background, should still acquire specific technical knowledge over time spent on committee; however, this expertise will likely be developed at a higher cost and slower rate than those with pre-existing backgrounds.

Expertise in EP committees

To quote Bowler and Farrell (1995, 220), from their investigation into the specialisation of the Parliament's committees, 'the position of the EP vis-a-vis other institutions depends in part upon its capacity to organise its resources and exploit its constitutional position'. The resource of information was originally cultivated by the EP's committees to challenge the Council's dominance of the legislative process before the acquisition and expansion of Parliament's formal powers (McElroy 2006). As the committees have profited, however, from Parliament's institutionalisation and expanded participation with decision-making (Whitaker 2011; Dinan 2014), the necessity of policy specialisation, to execute responsibilities efficiently, has only increased in salience.

The Environment committee offers a clear example of the significance of expertise to EP committees (Judge and Earnshaw 1994). The committee established itself, with a continuity of adroit leadership, as a legislative participant not easily dismissed by the Council (Burns 2013b), despite a membership characterised as lacking technical understanding (McCormick 2001). Committee members with experience of policymaking, derived from national legislatures and the EP, identified the benefits of cultivating relations and coordinating with Commission against Council. Developing expertise within the committee, upon how to exploit expanding constitutional powers, alongside developing external contacts for technical information, established the Parliament as an influential decision-making participant in environmental policymaking (Burns 2013b).

To act as affective agents, the committees require members with expertise who can be involved and participate directly in decision-making (Hermansen 2018). Expertise is deliberately cultivated and organised by selection and allocation processes, which, alongside partisan considerations, prioritises the experience of members. Positive links have been established between the possession of experience upon the political management and specific technicalities of policy, and assignment to Rapporteur (Yoshinaka, McElroy,

and Bowler 2010; Daniel 2013; Hermansen 2018); the prioritisation of electoral candidates (Pemstein, Meserve, and Bernhard 2015); and selection of Coordinators ('systematically related' to professional background) (Daniel and Thierse 2018, 951).

Collective expertise is essential to facilitate a committee's ability to support the Parliament's scrutiny of executives, with the application of information. Expertise, additionally, enables the committees to coordinate consensus on the Parliament's behalf. Committee members use their professional experience of policymaking and understanding as technical experts who will be deferred to, to develop proposals which can be coalesced upon (Daniel 2013). Consensus is crucial, as internal conflict can weaken the Parliament's position, with executives exploiting dissent. However, while the active involvement of the committees with decision-making is dependent upon expertise, a concentration is not guaranteed due to the unavoidable presence of legislator turnover.

Legislator turnover

The regular turnover of legislators is an ordinary process in any functioning democracy. Turnover occurs when members leave a legislature, due to electoral loss or not standing for re-election. A legislator may also rotate between committees, creating turnover without leaving the legislature. Considered against the typical western European parliament, the EP experiences high levels of electoral turnover (Treib and Schlipphak 2019). The Parliament thus, also, deviates from the example of the US Congress. This is significant, as much of our theoretical understanding upon the organisation of legislative committees originates from the majoritarian US congressional model, where turnover is extremely low and seniority in committee is of paramount importance (Makse 2017).

The consequence of turnover, at first glance, should be the creation of a situation where inexperience replaces experience (Salisbury and Shepsle 1981; Makse 2017). When a legislator who has built up policymaking expertise in a specific area leaves a committee, their years of accumulated political experience, including the institutional relationships they have cultivated, are lost from the committee. The retention of members should maintain a committee's utility and, potentially, allow it to grow, as retained members continue to acquire experience, incentivising further accumulation of specialised expertise. Subsequently, the greater turnover of members, the greater potential reduction in the utility of committee to plenary. This prospective relationship surrounding retention, turnover and expertise has been proposed in the context of the EP (Scarrow 1997; Mamadouh and Raunio 2003; Benedetto 2005; Daniel 2013; Alexander 2021), and comparative legislatures (Krehbiel 1991; Shaw 1998; Strøm 1998; Makse 2017), with turnover conceived as a mediating variable operating between information and utility. Some caveats, however, must be considered.

In circumstances when a legislator rotates between committees, the MEP, at least, possesses an experience of legislative procedures identical, or similar, to those on their new committee. The ToL, promulgated from 2009, reduced the diversity of legislative procedures engaged with by EP committees. Members, therefore, are less likely to expend the same resources, as they would have pre-Lisbon, to rapidly get up to speed with the dynamics of their new committee's decision-making involvement. To understand the impact of rotation, theories of employee learning affirm that by rotating actors within the

corporate structure, an individual's overall aptitude, alongside their understanding of how to engage with institutional structures for beneficial outcomes, will develop more rapidly than if an employee continues operating within the same sector as their point of entry (Eriksson and Ortega 2006; Dailey 2016). A similar impact may be had upon legislators. Rotation should not compensate for a loss of specific committee experience in the short term; however, it may promote legislators to acquire a broader understanding of how the legislative system operates at different points and accelerate their development as professional legislators at the European level, bringing a more diffuse benefit to the Parliament.

When considering the benefits of membership retention, it is unlikely that time and expertise exist in a perfect linear relationship. Senior actors, who have accumulated experience, are not inevitably resistant to new information; however, it may be increasingly difficult for a member to perpetually absorb information on evolving technical aspects of policy or preferences surrounding emergent issues. Turnover should facilitate a proportional intake of new interested members who, conceivably, contribute to a committee's continuing capacity to absorb information. While seemingly less likely to gain appointment to direct decision-making positions (Rapporteur, Chair or Coordinator) (Daniel 2013; Hermansen 2018), the potential receptiveness of inexperienced legislators to acquire contemporary expertise may help compensate for senior members reaching an informational saturation point, ameliorating the prospect of stagnation. Similar relations are observed within private sector institutions, where new actors are observed as highly responsive to absorbing information, which can benefit the institution overall by maintaining a dynamic workforce (Dailey 2016).

Beyond work on epistemic communities, highlighting the importance of knowledge-based experts to policymaking (Haas 1992), select studies have assessed the significance of professional expertise on EP committees (Whitaker 2011; Daniel 2013; Daniel and Thierse 2018; Hermansen 2018). The greater the collective professional aptitude of members, the better prospect a committee should have to support the legislature with technical information. Turnover will inevitably result in legislators with professional expertise leaving their relevant committees; however, new members with appropriate backgrounds should be attracted to these committees, replacing any aggregated loss. Consequently, there should be no major reduction in the concentration of technical expertise from turnover if these conditions are being met.

Finally, Mamadouh & Raunio's statement, at the beginning of this paper, upon the conceivable impact of turnover, occurred before the Parliament increased access to internal independent sources of information, which Mamadouh and Raunio (2003, 349) criticised, at the time, as lacking. Alongside the continuing non-independent support members receive from their political groupings, MEPs have expanded their personal offices, due to extended financial resources, with increased quality and staffing levels (Pegan 2017). Additionally, from 2013, a centralised policy research unit, DG Parliamentary Research Services, was established to supply members with in-depth information (Dinan 2014). The committees' administrative staff, the Secretariat, also continue to offer dedicated support to members, alongside management of the legislative process. However, career mobility practices have diluted the concentration of technical expertise within Secretariat units (Alexander 2021). Nevertheless, the advent of greater access to independent information has, to an extent, likely reduced the dependence of committees upon technically informed MEPs.

Committee Turnover Rates

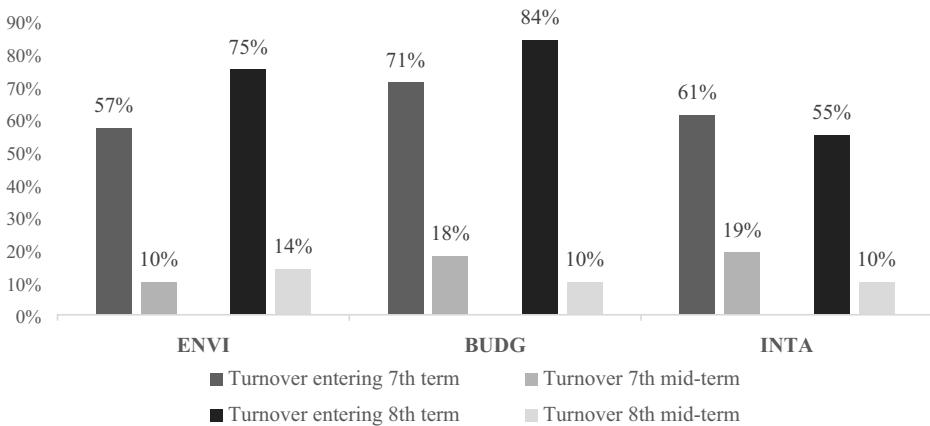


Figure 1. Committee turnover rates.

Case selection

Three case studies have been selected, the Committee on the Environment, Public Health, and Food Safety (ENVI), the Committee on Budgets (BUDG) and the Committee on International Trade (INTA). According to existing accounts (Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton 2007; Yordanova 2009; Whitaker 2011), both the ENVI committee and the BUDG committee are regarded, by reputation, as influential actors within their policy remits, supporting the plenary's engagement. The INTA committee is a potentially important actor, having gained powers with the ToL to recommend the ratification or veto of free trade agreements (FTA) to the plenary. The jury is still out, however, on whether the INTA committee had realised its potential during the timeframe of this paper, having been dismissed as a junior committee lacking the expertise collectively within its membership required to be an effective support agent (Kleimann 2011).

Each of the selected committees have been classified as being driven by, and organised around, the acquisition and use of expert informational resources to a predominant or significant extent. Membership expertise is seen as being necessary for the BUDG and INTA committees, or relied upon to an extent in the ENVI committee (Yordanova 2009). Expert members should seek to be retained or gravitate towards these committees. Importantly, the committees do represent variations in levels of membership turnover at the transition point between terms (see Figure 1). Observations are made at high (2/3) and moderate (1/2) levels of turnover, to explore its effects on collective member expertise in these different circumstances. Seat reassignment may additionally occur at the term's midway point; however, unlike the term transition, only minor changes to composition usually take place, providing a level of continuity (see Whitaker 2011, 37–38).

Method

A qualitative approach was adopted in this paper with the use of 30 semi-structured interviews. Lead-off questions were utilised to engage in evolving discussion upon relevant topics related to committee turnover. For the sake of brevity excerpts from

interviews are used to illustrate the findings and emergent patterns of response. The interview content was coded from transcripts with a thematic approach. Emergent themes corresponded to those operationalised elements, discussed above, which are drawn from current theories. These relevant themes included (1) 'Member turnover', (2) 'Member retention', (3) 'political experience', (4) 'professional experience' and (5) 'institutional relationships'.

As this paper is concerned with exploring assumptions made regarding expertise and the capacity of committees to continue supporting the plenary, rather than measuring the influence that EP committees exercise over other institutions, interviews were conducted with actors who have directly participated in different roles in the legislative activity of committees. Committee actors interviewed included MEPs, the assistants of MEPs, Committee Secretariats, and other EP administrators. Several interviews were also conducted with officials outside of the cases, who had previously worked or had contact in some capacity with members on case committees, to verify relevant statements and gain further qualified insight.

Data was additionally collected on the 146 MEPs who were registered as full members in the case committees. Individual committee membership retention and turnover rates were recorded, and the overall parliamentary experience of members accounted. This was broken down as time spent on the committees and time spent in Parliament, to observe both the dynamics of expertise gained within the Parliament and specifically on a single committee, and how this was distributed. The curricula vitae (CVs) of all 146 committee members were collated for information on professional backgrounds following as a guide the categories of Yoshinaka, McElroy, and Bowler (2010, 479), developed to classify relevant expertise falling under each EP committee.

Findings

Policymaking expertise

Possessing a level of policymaking expertise is important to committee members. 'It does assist members' in better policymaking, 'knowing who to contact from experience' when 'dealing with complex issues and extra information is required' to make acceptable proposals (Interview 1). A level of policymaking experience was indicated within the majority of interviews as being beneficial to members and committee overall (90% of interviews). Convention would dictate that committees with a higher rate of turnover would have a lower potential to support the Parliament, because of a dilution of policymaking expertise in committee. Consequently, expectations were, given their high turnover rates (Figure 1), that the ENVI and BUDG committees would be diminished after the 7th term, while the INTA committee would find its ability to support the plenary, comparatively, less reduced. In fact, the evidence collected did not fully confirm all expectations.

Beginning with the BUDG committee, while the committee lost experienced members with turnover, the loss was described as providing a potential trade-off – experience had been exchanged for a degree of refreshment. 'Over the last five years [the 7th term] the working relations [between committee and Commission] were not as good as they had been previously [6th term]' (Interview 2) at senior levels. Despite retaining some

experienced members in the 7th term, not much contact existed between rank-and-file BUDG members and the Commission, adding to an underdeveloped relationship at a senior level (Interview 3). Working relationships between the Commission and BUDG committee were not as developed at an important informal level of informational exchange, which policymaking expertise should facilitate. 'Unfortunately, with the Commission [7th term] the informal relations were not very fruitful' (Interview 2). A diminished informal relationship between committee and Commission was perceived as impacting the BUDG committee's ability to support the plenary's pursuit of its budgetary preferences, with the loss of a natural ally, against the Council, and the associated exchange of information that can be vital to affect outcomes (Interview 1, 2, 3). While the Parliament was seemingly successful in influencing the important Multi-annual Financial Framework (See: Benedetto 2019), which took place over this period, BUDG committee members felt the fight was harder at times, than it could have been, had committee and Commission possessed better working relationships at all points.

The impact of turnover, entering the 8th term, was not perceived to have negatively affected, but rather was seen to reaffirm the BUDG committee's ability to support the Parliament, by facilitating a fresh start with the Commission. Upon entering the term, it was apparent 'that these relations will improve and have improved with this Commission [8th term]' because of BUDG committee membership turnover. The significant level of turnover in the 8th term should not be underestimated: 'in this Parliament almost 70/80% of the committee are new' (Interview 2). Despite this volume of new members on the committee (Interview 3), an upturn in relations with the Commission were apparent. Turnover refreshed and revitalised the relationship between BUDG committee and Commission, or at least created more conducive conditions for an improvement. However, it may also be possible that the Committee became more reliant upon the Commission, and a good relationship, at this time, due to a loss of experienced members.

Turning to the ENVI committee, policymaking experience, particularly upon the policy-making dynamics of the Parliament and how to achieve a consensus, were expressed as important resources, which committee members applied to support the Parliament's participation in decision-making (Interview 4, 5). However, the benefits of extensive policy-making experience to the committee may only reach to a certain point, as 'there is a sell-by [date] for everything and, sometimes, members who have been there for too long can provide blockage' (Interview 6). Some experienced members were seen as acting, at times, as a hindrance to, rather than being, a facilitator of legislative progress, which risked making the committee a less dynamic decision-making participant. The observation is that while 'it is always good to have people who are experienced in doing it [policy-making] for a while, unfortunately, everything does go off after a while', and the membership must be periodically refreshed if the committee is not to stagnate and lose relevancy. Committee turnover is not necessarily perceived as an inevitable negative: 'it is good to have new people [on committee]', and when considering overall effectiveness, a balance is needed between experience and fresh perspectives (Interview 6).

The INTA committee was recognised as the committee to be on during the 7th and 8th terms by experienced parliamentarians, because of a perception that the 'committee would be one of the most influential' post-ToL (Interview 7), which led to a high demand for seats (interview 8, 9). The committee aimed to maximise its legislative role, to establish the Parliament as a more consequential actor in international trade policy, as members

Table 1. Seniority and institutional memory of committee membership.

	Committee (7th Term)		
	ENVI	BUDG	INTA
Total Membership (N)	71	44	31
Mean years (\pm SD) in Parliament	8.94 \pm 5.77	9.11 \pm 7.31	9.74 \pm 7.58
Mean years (\pm SD) on Committee	7.22 \pm 5.19	6.93 \pm 5.96	5.23 \pm 3

Collected from EP Website MEP parliamentary profiles (2021).

new to the committee, but senior in Parliament, ‘brought their previous institutional experience’ (Interview 8) from maximising the influence of other previously in vogue committees to bear on the INTA committee’s work. The committee, although containing a membership comparatively lacking in direct policymaking experience, did contain a similar concentration of senior parliamentarians to the BUDG and ENVI committees (Table 1). Thus, aggregate levels of parliamentary seniority, and not exclusively committee specific seniority, would appear to be important for a committee seeking to establish relevancy on behalf of the Parliament. The rate of parliamentary and committee seniority on the INTA committee could only have reached the level it did, from moderate turnover allowing for the recruitment of senior parliamentarians without the significant undermining of specific experience.

The INTA committee does, however, exemplify the prevailing cost-benefit relationship of turnover. Partisanship is an ‘accepted part of the process to express our constituent’s interests’ (Interview 10). Select senior INTA committee members expressed the need to mediate new, politically active, members from getting carried away with proposals which would have undermined the committee’s position, due to a lack of policymaking and technical experience within the committee’s remit, upon what is acceptable to Council/Commission, or, indeed, technically accomplishable (Interview 11, 7). Some new members pushed ‘potentially unworkable ideological solutions’, however, these were, apparently, mediated by senior members (Interview 7). For their own part, junior members perceived their role as ‘to push the more senior members to embrace the potential that rule changes had given the [INTA] committee’, to continue expanding Parliament’s decision-making participation through the agency of the committee (Interview 9).

The case committees (and anecdotally in examples beyond (Interview 12, 13)) did appear to require a level of refreshment every few years. New members enter into the committees with a ‘fresh look at our problems’ (Interview 2), often because of having ‘a different parliamentary experience’ or backgrounds (Interview 7), enabling the committees to come up with potentially original solutions to policy problems (Interview 11). The role of turnover is recognised by members as having a positive relationship with maintaining committees as relevant support agents of the Parliament, to such an extent that senior committee members can make the choice to remove themselves from committee roles: ‘I could have remained [in position], but I refused as I thought that all the ideas, I could have on these issues I had implemented’ (Interview 2). While this was an isolated example, an acknowledgement was made of the negative effect senior members could have, if they became roadblocks to original policymaking ideas: ‘it is up to younger and different members with innovative ideas’ to maintain the committee’s relevancy through continued innovation (Interview 2).

Even significant levels of turnover may not inevitably weaken a committee's ability to support the plenary. By side-lining outdated views, introducing new policy ideas, and providing opportunities for improved inter-institutional relations, turnover can perform a reinvigorating function. However, higher rates of turnover may risk leaving committees more reliant on their relationships with external actors, due to the loss of specific experience.

Professional expertise

Professional expertise was marginal within the ENVI committee during the 7th term (Figure 2), 'The ENVI committee, it is different' from other EP committees, 'there are a lot of colleagues with a good will, who want to do something good for the world' who 'do not arrive with technical expertise' (Interview 14, 15, 4, 5). Even when members 'know a lot because that is our profession, there are other technical things you cannot know' (Interview 14). In addition, the professional expertise, that the ENVI committee does contain, is spread over the committee's wide policy remit, covering environment, food safety standards and health care. Conversely, the BUDG committee, although having similar levels of professional expertise to the ENVI committee, focuses on the narrower area of budgetary mechanisms, where members can more directly apply their understanding of the financial/budgetary instruments utilised (Interview 3).

While I find, as expected, that the ENVI committee's membership is somewhat deficient in technical expertise, this may not directly harm the committee overall, as it is not the 'acquisition of information' which professional expertise would facilitate that is important, or problematic, for ENVI member's engagement. 'The difficulty is processing the information, understanding it, [and] coming to conclusions on it, more than actually getting it' (Interview 6). It is not seen on the ENVI committee as a significant disadvantage (Interview 16) to lack professional expertise as technical 'information is widely available' (Interview 4). When a new member enters the committee, information is readily accessible for them to absorb and develop a contemporary understanding regardless of professional background. On other committees, information is, however, not as accessible.

Due to the environment associated with international trade policy, documents both of a technical and political nature are often highly sensitive, containing closely guarded details upon negotiating positions. Many documents are subject to legal restrictions which prevent members removing them from the premises of committee meetings (Interview 17). The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), which, attempted, to establish an FTA between the EU and the USA, is an example where members found their original access to information impeded. In comparable committees a member without professional expertise could 'contact an external expert within the policy area', not only to gain the specialist's understanding but also to develop their own expertise (Interview 5, 18, 19). INTA committee members were often placed in situations where they 'want to pass on a [TTIP related] document to this [external] specialist academic who could tell us the impact, but cannot, due to the restrictions in place'. Members are, therefore, at key moments limited in their ability to generate the information or evidence needed to fully support their position in committee (Interview 17) and are, furthermore, restricted in their ability to gain expertise if they do not already possess it (Interview 8, 9). The cost of not possessing a level of professional expertise is evident as

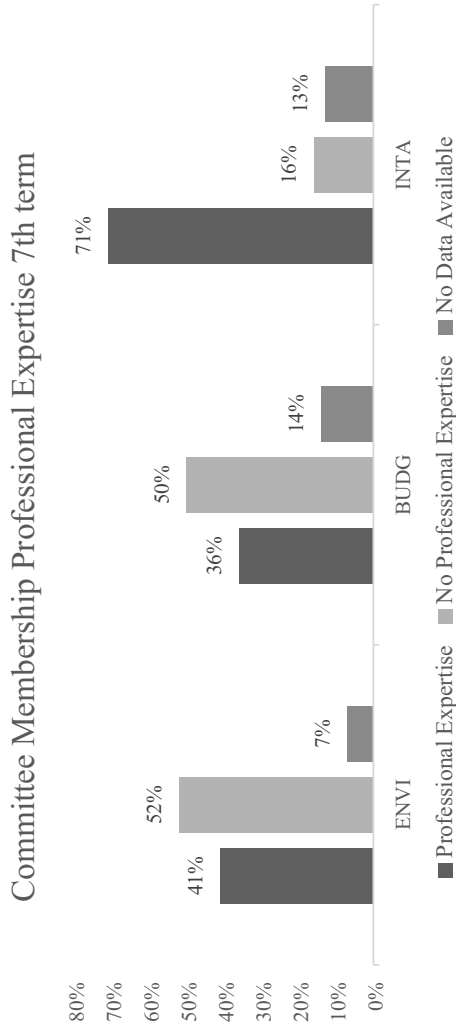


Figure 2. Committee professional expertise. source: CVs of MEPs (2014).

significant, more so than in the other cases, if a member wishes an active role in decision-making, accounting for the more prominent level of professional expertise contained, and required, within the INTA committee to support the plenary.

Based on the evidence, elevated levels of professional expertise strengthen, and under no circumstances would weaken a committee's utility, but particularly if a committee's access to external expertise is limited. Furthermore, the narrower and more technical the policy remit of a committee, the more professional expertise can be used as a valuable resource.

Discussion

Turnover has been purported to be a mitigating variable, which could weaken the concentration of expertise within committee. This is a significant assumption to make, as reduced expertise should undermine a committee's utility to the plenary and, subsequently, reduce a legislature's potential ability to hold executives accountable. According to Mamadouh and Raunio (2003, 349) turnover is potentially a 'serious problem' affecting the legislative influence of the EP from the loss of specific expertise in committee. Daniel (2013) offers similar concerns, that turnover may undermine the utility of the EP's committees with consequences for the party groupings. However, these assumptions, as time has progressed and the Parliament has further institutionalised, may not accurately account for the complexities of turnover, with evidence provided here that turnover can operate, contrary to informed expectations, to benefit a committee with refreshment. I, therefore, offer a more subtle interpretation of turnover, and understanding upon how it guides the continuing ability of EP committees to facilitate the Parliament's consequential decision-making involvement.

To maintain relevancy, as a supportive agent, committees may be required to undergo a level of turnover, which removes members past their policymaking prime and replace them with new blood members who can revitalise the committee with fresh ideas, preserving the committee's ability to deal with ever-evolving policy issues. Once a member reaches, or draws towards, an 'expiry date', they may no longer act as the same asset, but become a detriment as a bottleneck to original or innovative policy solutions, increasingly counterweighing the benefit of their specific knowledge. Vast area specific expertise could become an impedance to absorbing contemporary information, as policy issues are continually developing new complexities, providing a reduced economy of fresh ideas within committee over time. New members should possess a more open capacity to learn on the job about the area to which they are attracted. This openness may be heightened if the legislator does not possess extensive pre-existing knowledge, promoting the acquisition of information as a precondition for an active participation in policy discussions.

In practice, a complete haemorrhage of experience would undercut a committee's function as repository for policy information. A continuity of committee-specific policymaking expertise needs to be maintained each term to serve in combination with refreshing turnover. A loss of senior policymakers would increase the risk of capture, with the committee becoming an informational supplicant to other institutions or external actors. A balanced membership should mitigate this possibility. The results generated, therefore, support Whitaker's (2011) claims surrounding the importance of seniority. Senior parliamentarians, as well as remaining as sitting members

on preferred committees (Whitaker 2011), however, can still rotate and share their experience as professional legislators, to realise their new committee's potential as a utility to the plenary. As the number of committees needing to be established initially as consequential support agents reduces, the trend of senior members being retained on their desired committees should continue.

Regarding the second element of retained policymaking experience, inter-institutional contact, the relationships between committee, Commission or Council can at times become dysfunctional, weakening the committee's ability to gain information, coordinate compromise through informal channels and signal intention. While turnover will inevitably, in conjunction to weakening collective specific policy knowledge, disrupt the collection of interpersonal links between committee members and external actors, it can provide an opportunity to reinvigorate dysfunctional relationships. In addition to time and policymaking experience, interpersonal skills are a likely factor in the development and longevity of inter-institutional relationships. However, an improved relationship, after significant turnover within a committee may, additionally, signal that the committee has become more reliant upon the relationship for information, improving contact out of increased necessity of partnership.

Finally, the use of professional expertise as a resource can vary between committees. If technical information is widely available, as in the ENVI committee, because of well-established contacts with external experts, then committee members should not require professional expertise as a prerequisite to contribute towards the collective utility of the committee. Higher concentrations of prepossessed technical expertise, however, would not be detrimental to the committee's overall informational capacity. If technical information is not widely accessible outside the committee, due to underdeveloped or restricted relationships with external experts, as observed in the INTA committee, then members must rely on their internalised technical knowledge. The collective cost of members not possessing a technical understanding within their committee's remit, under these circumstances, would be a reduced capacity to support the plenary in representing its preferences vis-à-vis executives. A variation in levels of professional expertise between committee may not necessarily represent a like-for-like variation in the informational support committees provide. However, some committees are more reliant upon professional experts to adequately fulfil their informational function, and, subsequently, would be more exposed to the negative effect of turnover, if expert members are not returned.

Conclusions

Unlike Sisyphus, the efforts of the EP's committees to rebuild their utility each term are far from futile. In parallel to the normative benefits of keeping democratic representation refreshed with consistent elections, a regular turnover of committee members would appear to have a tangible impact on the continued relevancy of the case committees by preventing stagnation, which has too often become the hallmark of systems with high incumbency – the US congress being a prime example. A periodic transfusion of new blood provides committees with a continuing capacity to absorb contemporary information, casting off potential deadwood, and the opportunity to revitalise inter-institutional relationships, which may have become dysfunctional, at the cost of a periodically reduced capacity of specific expertise.

This paper offers a perspective on the importance of refreshment to the ability of EP committees to act as agents and facilitate the Parliament's participation as the direct democratic voice within the decision-making processes of further European integration. However, the role of committees to support the capacity of their plenaries is a familiar feature found across parliamentary systems. Turnover of policymakers is also a ubiquitous occurrence, yet the impact of turnover is too often assumed. Future studies should be able to test the generality of this paper's conclusions regarding the impact of refreshment and the informational saturation points of legislators.

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ORCID

David A. Alexander  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4798-0638>

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Appendix

Interviews

- Interview 1: Assistant BUDG Committee. 6/11/14. Brussels.BE
- Interview 2: Member BUDG Committee. 4/12/14. Brussels.BE
- Interview 3: Member BUDG Committee. 4/11/14. Brussels.BE
- Interview 4: Assistant ENVI Committee. 20/3/14. Brussels.BE
- Interview 5: Assistant ENVI Committee. 7/11/14. Brussels.BE
- Interview 6: Member ENVI Committee. 7/1/15. SKYPE-Interview
- Interview 7: Member INTA Committee. 15/1/16. Brussels.BE
- Interview 8: Member INTA Committee. 15/12/15. Phone-Interview
- Interview 9: Member INTA Committee. 2/12/15. Phone-Interview
- Interview 10: Assistant INTA Committee. 7/11/14. Brussels.BE
- Interview 11: Member INTA Committee. 17/11/15. Phone-Interview
- Interview 12: Committee Secretariat. 15/5/14. Brussels.BE
- Interview 13: Committee Secretariat. 15/5/14. Brussels.BE
- Interview 14: Member ENVI Committee. 6/11/14. Brussels.BE
- Interview 15: Committee Secretariat. 20/3/14. Brussels.BE
- Interview 16: Committee Secretariat. 19/3/14. Brussels.BE
- Interview 17: Member INTA Committee. 12/1/16. Phone-Interview
- Interview 18: Member ENVI Committee. 8/4/14. Phone-Interview
- Interview 19: Member ITRE Committee. 28/2/14. Brussels.BE
- Interview 20: Committee Secretariat. 3/7/14. Phone-Interview
- Interview 21: Budgetary Official. 5/11/14. Brussels.BE
- Interview 22: Committee Secretariat. 2/4/14. Phone-Interview
- Interview 23: Committee Secretariat. 13/5/14. Brussels.BE
- Interview 24: Committee Secretariat. 13/5/14. Brussels.BE
- Interview 25: Committee Secretariat. 14/5/14. Brussels.BE
- Interview 26: Committee Secretariat. 16/5/14. Brussels.BE
- Interview 27: Committee Secretariat. 25/6/14. Phone-Interview
- Interview 28: Committee Secretariat. 4/11/14. Brussels.BE
- Interview 29: Committee Secretariat. 14/5/14. Brussels.BE
- Interview 30: Committee Secretariat. 4/12/14. Brussels.BE