# Agenda Responsiveness in the European Council:

## Public Priorities, Policy Problems and Political Attention

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**Abstract:**

The existence of political responsiveness in multi-level systems, like the EU, remains an open question despite significant recent research on the topic. In this article we study whether the European Council responds to the shifting policy priorities of European citizens. More specifically, we explore the synchronic and diachronic associations between what people consider to be the most important problems and the political attention devoted to these issues from 2003 to 2014. The economic crisis after 2008 appears to have made the ranking of public concerns and the European Council agenda more alike. However, a detailed examination of the shifts in prioritization of single issues over time reveals little evidence for dynamic issue responsiveness. Recently the European Council has paid more attention to the issues that the public considered the most pressing problems but the convergence could possibly be driven by the intensity of the underlying policy problems.

**Key words:** political responsiveness; European Union; policy agenda; European Council; public opinion

**Introduction**

The multi-level system of the European Union (EU) is widely accused of suffering from a democratic deficit. EU policy making takes place in a complex system with multiple layers of government, in which the mechanisms of accountability are weak (Hobolt and Tilley 2014). According to critics, the result is a system with 'policy drift' away from the ideal preferences of the voters or a lack of linkage between what the public wants and what the system delivers (Føllesdal and Hix 2006). Discontent against the decisions coming from Brussels has been widespread. The recent economic crisis served as a trigger for further dissatisfaction as citizens mobilized in the streets in many European countries to protest against austerity measures agreed at the EU level.

According to studies of political responsiveness, it is not unexpected to find such a lack of linkage between public opinion and policy in multi-level systems. The vertical division of competences is likely to make it harder for the citizens to acquire accurate information regarding what decision makers are doing. The lack of civic awareness of policy outputs is further likely to affect the ability of politicians to respond to public desires negatively (Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Wlezien and Soroka 2011).

Despite the complexities of transmitting information between voters and decision makers in the EU, existing research has found some evidence of a link between public preferences on European integration and the volume of EU legislative outputs, even if the findings depend on the operationalizations and measurements used (Bølstad 2015; Toshkov 2011). Yet, such findings are based on analyses conducted at the *aggregate* level in which general attitudes towards the EU are related to the overall volume of legislative production. This can make it difficult to control for the scale of the underlying policy problems in different policy areas, which may be the actual triggers of the reactions by the political elites rather than public opinion. Moreover, the focus has been on the legislative acts produced by the EU even if many

aspects of EU integration do not take the form of legislative outputs. The EU decision makers at the central level have limited competences to issue legislation in many areas. Instead, they often react to public concerns by allocating attention to them on the political agendas. Presented policy opinions or recommendations on these agendas can lay the ground for subsequent action at the EU and national level (Princen 2009).

Taking a policy agendas approach, we therefore examine *rhetorical* rather than *effective responsiveness* (Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008). Such agenda responsiveness may occur if the public's issue priorities are translated into political priorities (see e.g. Bevan and Jennings 2014; Chaqués-Bonafont and Palau 2011; Jennings and John 2009; Jones and Baumgartner 2004; Jones, Larsen-Price, and Wilkerson 2009). We focus on the top EU agenda setter, the European Council, which originated outside of the EU treaty framework, but has left a substantial impact on the integration process as a result of its informal powers. Yet, the mechanisms via which the European Council selects problems and prioritises issues have until recently been only scarcely examined (Alexandrova, Carammia, and Timmermans 2012; Werts 2008; Wessels 2008b).

Rather than looking at aggregate measures of opinion and policy output, we analyse whether there is a link between how highly the public and the European Council prioritize *specific* policy areas. Furthermore, we are interested in whether the European Council sets its agenda based on the concerns of the citizens or whether the policy priorities of the European Council simply reflect the severity of underlying problems with which the institution is faced. We match biannual Eurobarometer data on the public's prioritization of policy topics to detailed coding of the attention drawn to these themes in European Council Conclusions over eleven and a half years. Our analyses examine both the synchronic and diachronic associations for each policy area separately covering thirteen issue areas over the period 2003–2014.

Looking at specific policy areas has the advantage that we can more easily control for whether a potential relationship between priorities and attention has a spurious nature by

including issue specific controls for third variables. Hence, an important challenge is to distinguish between whether politicians are responding to public opinion and whether they and the public are responding to some other external events. In this way, the distinctiveness of our contribution stems from conducting the first study of rhetorical analysis in the EU in a design with policy areas as the unit of analysis, which scrutinizes the causal relationship between opinion and attention by adding important control variables to each regression.

Our results present evidence of a moderate contemporaneous relationship between what the public considers important and what decision makers pay attention to. However, a closer examination of the causal mechanisms between changes in public priorities and political attention per policy area does not show consistent evidence of dynamic responsiveness. In several policy areas, higher convergence between the policy concerns of the public and the European Council agenda may also be related to changes in the intensity of the underlying policy problems. These findings underline the importance of carefully controlling for external events and considering the complex multi-level nature of the data in studies of the relationship between opinion and attention. Even if our focus is explicitly on the EU, these results may have implications for the design of studies of responsiveness more broadly.

**Political Responsiveness in the European Union**

Since the 1960s, a body of literature on political responsiveness has developed, which has found evidence of links between what the public wants and public budgets, policy agendas, and policy outputs (e.g. Jennings and John 2009; Jones, Larsen-Price, and Wilkerson 2009; Page and Shapiro 1983; Wlezien 1995). Even if the vast share of research has focused on the US, analyses covering a broader set of countries have also emerged (e.g. Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008; Peters and Ensink 2015; Wlezien and Soroka 2012) plus a few studies examining the relationship between opinion and policy production in the EU (Bølstad 2015; Toshkov 2011).

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Whereas the responsiveness literature shares an interest in the possible link between public opinion and the actions of policy makers, there are substantial differences in approach and empirical focus. As indicated by Eulau and Karps, responsiveness is a "complex, compositional phenomenon that entails a variety of possible targets in the relationship between representatives and represented" (1977: 241). A distinction can be drawn between cross-sectional design which examine congruence between public opinion and the behaviour of policy makers (e.g. Miller and Stokes 1963) and dynamic ones, which examines the link between opinion and policy over time (e.g. Wlezien 1995). We are interested in both the synchronic and diachronic relationship between the issue priorities of the public and the agenda of EU decision makers. However, whereas the former tells us something about whether politicians devote their attention to the same issues as the ones the public prioritizes, only the latter can tell us something about responsiveness in the stronger sense of the public exerting a causal effect on the European Council agenda. It should also be emphasized that while the two types of analyses are important, they are not the only ways of studying responsiveness. Moreover, responsiveness is in itself only one component of the broader concept of representation (Eulau and Karps 1977).

At first outset, it may seem somewhat paradoxical to expect alignment between opinion and the actions of policy makers in the EU. In a federal, multi-level system, it is harder for voters to stay informed about political decision making, which may prevent them from formulating straightforward preferences that decision makers can respond to (Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Wlezien and Soroka 2011). The EU can be seen as a *hard* case for detecting political responsiveness even within the broader category of multi-level systems. As mentioned, discontent with the European project has been prominent. No matter whether the judgment comes from academics, policy practitioners or citizens, a large share of them agree that the EU constitutes a system where the decisions taken do not represent the views of the people and which demonstrates low capacity to solve their problems (Scharpf 1999). Many of the decision

makers are not democratically elected and parties do not link constituents and the political system in the same way as they usually do in the EU member states (Lindberg, Rasmussen, and Warntjen 2008). No common public sphere exists in the EU, and national media only pay limited attention to the EU level. According to Soroka and Wlezien, 'there is good reason to think that we will have clear policy responsiveness only when we observe clear public responsiveness to policy' (2010: 52-53).

Moreover, even if the voters could formulate clear preferences on EU policy, the literature contains no lack of arguments that it may not pay off for national politicians participating in EU policy making to translate such citizen preferences into actions. If they are interested in seeking re-election, national vote choice is much more dominated by the positions citizens hold on the left-right dimension than attitudes towards European integration. Several decades ago, Reif and Schmitt (1980) developed the notion of 'second-order elections' referring to the fact that elections to the European Parliament were used by voters to reward or punish the current parties in government rather than driven by attitudes towards European integration. Their argument was subsequently extended to EU referendums (Franklin, Van der Eijk, and Marsh 1995). At the same time Van der Eijk and Franklin (2004) have pointed out that, even if elections are often not about the EU, Europe may still be 'a sleeping giant' of public opinion scepticism towards the European project, which could be woken up by political entrepreneurs politicizing the issue. However, according to Green-Pedersen (2012), we need not worry too much about this scenario. Based on a study of Denmark, he argues that those politicians who would potentially have an incentive to wake up the sleeping giant *cannot*, whereas those who can *do not want to*. In such a world where the issue of Europe is unlikely to be heavily politicized, we would not expect EU decision makers to have an incentive to be very responsive to what the public wants.

Opposed to this view stands an alternative scenario, which gives more ground for expecting national politicians involved in EU policy making to indeed have an incentive to act in line with the wishes of the citizens. First, Franklin and Wlezien (1997) have found evidence that since the mid-1980s the public might actually have adjusted its attitude towards EU unification in response to past levels of legislation. The argument is that an increase in the level of EU legislation decreases support for further unification whereas a decrease stimulates support for further action. According to such an argument, the public might have meaningful preferences about whether overall EU engagement should increase or decrease even in the absence of strong European news media.

In addition, there is some evidence that such attitudes towards European integration do play a role for national electoral politics. Research shows that European integration exerts an impact on electoral choice in domestic elections (Gabel 2000), even if this impact may be of a conditional nature (De Vries 2007). Moreover, several authors have argued that we have seen an increased politicization of the issue of Europe since Maastricht, often emphasizing the role of extreme parties in driving these processes (e.g. Hooghe and Marks 2009). Whereas there is not much evidence that the members of the European Parliament are kept accountable for their actions in elections to this body (Hobolt and Tilley 2014), the national Heads of State or Government in the European Council and their Ministers in the Council may be kept accountable for their actions through national elections.

Finally, European policy making today is about a lot more than deciding on the direction and speed of European integration. Europe deals with a range of every-day policies similar to the issues dealt with in more traditional political systems. Whether anyone will want to (or can) wake up "the EU giant" is therefore not a precondition for whether we can expect national leaders to be responsive to their citizens in the conduct of EU policy. They need not do so. Instead, what they need is to have an incentive to devote their attention at the EU level among

issue areas in line with the policy priorities of their citizens. Such incentives might exist because national politicians have constrained themselves by delegating the competence for many policies in full or in part to the EU. In a number of areas, the only arena for the Heads of State or Government to respond to citizen concerns is the European one. Moreover, in an increasingly globalized and interdependent world national leaders are faced with a number of public worries, which are difficult to address at the domestic level only. Externalities might put pressure on them to come up with a European response in order to solve the problems prioritized by their electorate.

Despite the criticism of the EU's lack of democratic deficit, the few existing studies of EU responsiveness have in fact found some evidence of a relationship between aggregate measures of preferences and volume of policy output in this system, even though the causal mechanisms on which the association rests are not entirely clear. Toshkov (2011) shows that there is a relationship between public support for European integration and important EU policy output, but points out that this link breaks down in the middle of the 1990s. Bølstad (2015) reports that this pattern holds when distinguishing between the impact of opinion in the core and in the periphery EU member states, even if the size of the effect varies.

However, instead of policy reacting to opinion it is possible that both are reacting to external events. The risk that the causal mechanism between opinion and policy is underspecified is a challenge not only in EU studies but in studies of responsiveness more generally. This challenge may be particularly pronounced in research linking global measures of opinion and policy in which it can be difficult to control for relevant factors that may explain why opinion and policy move in a similar fashion. By analysing specific policy areas we are able to scrutinize the underlying causal mechanisms in more detail since we can more easily control for variation in the intensity of the underlying policy problems.

Moreover, even if producing policy output is no doubt an important part of *effective responsiveness*, using volume of legislative activity is also a somewhat crude measure. Requiring that the volume of *everyday legislative outputs* coming from the EU in a given policy area should be linked to the overall preferences of the public for using *common action* in this area for the EU to be politically responsible may be too demanding. By focusing on directives in this aggregate analysis of EU level responsiveness, Toshkov (2011) gets closer to a measure of "important legislation". However, his measure still cannot capture many of the aspects of European integration. Notably, it neglects *rhetorical responsiveness* (Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008), i.e. how politicians address public concerns by discussing these concerns rather than producing concrete acts.

Rhetorical responsiveness can be expected to be particularly important in a multi-level system such as the EU where politicians need to share competences with other decision-making levels and often do not have jurisdictions to address the public's worries by producing actual legislation. EU politicians cannot, for example, issue laws in areas of exclusive member state competence just as decision makers at the US federal level need to respect that certain issues are within state jurisdiction. At the same time, the general public is not necessarily aware which areas fall into exclusive national, shared or exclusive EU competence, so citizens might well end up blaming the EU for lack of action even in areas where it does not have any formal rule-making competences. Therefore, EU policy makers still have an incentive to respond to the public in areas where supranational legislation is not an option.

Divisions of competence will not necessarily restrain them from responding to public views but they will have to do so *rhetorically*: i.e. by discussing issues which the people care about. These discussions are not just "cheap talk" but set out political directions and serve as crucial instruments of policy planning. And sometimes, they can lead to legislative responses at both the central and lower decision-making levels. Research on the US shows how agenda-

setting activities are linked to responsiveness by signalling priorities, which are translated into effective responses at later stages of the policy process (Jones, Larsen-Price, and Wilkerson 2009). Moreover, political discussions and prioritization in multi-level systems can have other far-reaching consequences, most notably related to the redrawing of jurisdictional boundaries.

Therefore, our approach to studying political responsiveness differs from the most dominant one in the literature, which focuses on the relationship between the *positions* of the public and decision makers on various issues. We analyse agenda responsiveness, i.e. the link between the priorities of the citizens and the political elite (Bevan and Jennings 2014). Placing an issue on the agenda can be seen as the first stage of representation and a necessary step before hard laws can be made. Responding rhetorically constitutes a political signal to the citizens that their demands are taken seriously and likely to be dealt with, possibly in the form of political action.

**The case of the European Council**

We focus on the European Council, the top informal agenda setter in the EU, consisting of the Heads of State or Government from all member states, the President of the Commission and the President of the European Council.[i] Around its establishment in 1975 the European Council was conceived as a regular coordination arena at highest political level, expected guide the development of the Community and resolve conflicts. Over the course of its existence the body has gradually moved away from an arbitrative function towards setting the agenda for important aspects of the work of the EU (Nugent 2010; Rasmussen 2007; Werts 2008). It has become an institution of political leadership which pulls the strains of the integration process to the extent and in the direction of activity it desires. These developments have recently resulted in a long-needed spur in attention to the European Council in EU scholarship (Eggermont 2012; Foret and Rittelmeyer 2014; Puetter 2014; Werts 2008).

As a result of its high degree of informality and lack of *de jure* legislative functions the European Council can hardly be held accountable by the other EU institutions.[ii] It can act as a formation of the Council but only exceptionally has done so. Yet, the European Council often places issues on the agendas of other EU bodies: asks the Commission to come up with a proposal or the Council to speed up decision making in a certain direction. Due to the underlying power relationship these institutions are informally bound to consider such requests (see e.g. Eggermont 2012). Thus, holding the Commission or the Council accountable for certain actions could in practice mean attacking the messenger.

The European Council is free to set its own agenda and there is little knowledge regarding what determines how this institution allocates attention and prioritizes issues. It has always been very active in framing the Community's foreign policy, and arguably, it has acquired a self-designated special position in other domains, such as economic governance, defence, employment and social policy (Puetter 2014; 2012).[iii] Yet, the agenda experiences virtually no restrictions in scope and content, especially since the 1990s (Alexandrova, Carammia, and Timmermans 2012; Wessels 2008a). This means that the European Council does not have to limit its discussions to the legislative competences of the EU but is free to talk about issues of national jurisdiction as well. Both member state preferences (Tallberg 2008; Tallberg and Johansson 2008) and external factors, like focusing events (Princen and Rhinard 2006), are considered to play a role for deciding what issues to consider. However, whether the views of the public affect the decision of the EU Heads of State or Government to address an issue collectively we still do not know. The lack of academic interest in this topic is surprising considering the huge agenda-setting power of the European Council and the relative ambiguity as to what its discussion points are motivated by.

**Analysis Design and Data**

The outcome (dependent) variable in our study is attention to a thematic policy area. We rely on a new dataset of all European Council Conclusions, coded via the EU Policy Agendas Project Codebook (Alexandrova et al. 2014). The last represents an adapted version of the Policy Agendas coding system developed by Baumgartner and Jones (2009; Jones and Baumgartner 2005). The Conclusions constitute a list of the issues discussed by the EU leaders: evaluations of on-going EU activities, attention to relations with third countries and the EU's position in the world, aspirations for and announcements of actions or policy plans, etc. They are content coded at the quasi-sentence level, representing the most fine-grained level of detecting policy content in texts.

Our core explanatory (independent) variable is a measure of public opinion on a given policy theme derived from the so-called 'most important problem' (MIP) question from Eurobarometer surveys. The exact formulation of the question is: 'What do you think are the two most important issues facing (our country) at the moment?' It presents the respondents with a catalogue of issues; they can select from the list up to two items, which they perceive as the most important policy concerns at the particular moment. The data for our public opinion measure is available on biannual basis since 2003, which provides us with 23 time points until the middle of 2014. We have selected all topics on which the public prioritization data is available and matched them to the shares of attention in the European Council Conclusions.[iv] The policy fields are: economics, education, employment, energy, environment, foreign affairs, health, immigration, inflation, law and crime, pensions, taxation, and terrorism.

To assess the correspondence between public priorities and the agenda of the European Council and to investigate the possibility of rhetorical responsiveness in the EU, we conduct a series of separate synchronic (static, cross-sectional) and diachronic (dynamic, over time) analyses. The cross-sectional analyses track the extent to which the relative importance that the public attaches to different policy issues at a single point of time is associated with the attention

devoted to these issues by the European Council during the same period. We examine 23 such cross-sectional associations – from the first semester of 2003 to the first semester of 2014. We use two measures of association to characterize the strength of correspondence between the public's list of priorities and the European Council agenda. The first is the well-known Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient (rho). The second is Kendall's rank-order correlation coefficient (tau-b) which measures the similarity of the two issue orderings.

The second set of analyses tracks the co-evolution of public prioritization and European Council attention over time (2003.1 – 2014.1) for particular issues, one issue at a time. We examine 12 such time-series associations and analyse possible relationships between the two time series expressed in levels and in changes from the previous period (first differences). The analysis in levels explores the question whether there is a long-term correspondence between the importance of the issue in the eyes of the public and its level of attention in the European Council. The relationship in first differences focuses on the association between short-term fluctuations in public opinion and European Council attention; in other words, whether positive changes in public prioritization from one semester to the next are associated with positive changes in European Council attention and vice versa. Finally, to explore whether any associations we find are confounded by other variables, we present the results of several issue-level regression models of European Council attention on public prioritization and possible confounders tracking the underlying scale of the policy problem.

Our empirical approach allows us to characterize the cross-sectional and diachronic components of the covariation between public opinion and European Council attention separately and in detail. The alternative of pooling the two variance components together in a single statistical model has the disadvantage of mixing and concealing the sources of covariation. It also compounds the methodological difficulties arising from the complex structure of the data. These complications include auto-correlation, non-stationarity without co-

integration, and lack of systematic patterns in the lagged correlations. Evidence for auto-correlation raise the possibility of spurious correlation between the two sets of time-series (when expressed in levels). Complications related to non-stationarity of the time-series prevent us from employing more complex analytical methods like error correction models.[v] The correlation between the two sets of time-series is most often maximized when looking at contemporaneous time periods, precluding the use of Granger Causality models which require a temporal lag in the response of one time-series to another.[vi]

**Empirical Results: Does the European Council Respond to the Public?**

*Part A. Cross-Sectional Correspondence between Public Opinion and European Council Attention*

Table 1 presents the contemporaneous correlation coefficients between the percentage of the public that considers an issue one of the two 'most important problems' at the time and the share of attention devoted to the issue by the European Council during the same semester. Columns two and three include all 12 policy issues for which we have data, while columns four and five exclude foreign policy and defence. This topic is often at the bottom of the public agenda but on top of the European Council agenda, as it is part of the functions of the body to identify the strategic interests and objectives in foreign policy. So this domain severely biases the results towards not finding an association between the two variables. Moreover, from 2012 onwards the MIP response categories did not feature the topic foreign policy and defence.[vii]

When foreign policy is excluded, there is some moderate, positive contemporaneous correlation between the public priorities and the European Council agenda. The average over all time periods is 0.33 (Pearson's rho), but after 2008 especially there is a rather consistent pattern of positive correlations (between over 0.4 and up to almost 0.8). If we compare the period 2009-2014 to the period 2003-2008 there is a pronounced increase in the positive

correlation implying that the public and the European Council agenda have become more related. That being said, the rather lower Kendall's rank-order coefficients (tau-b)[viii] warns us that, despite the relatively high Pearson's correlations, the ordering of the policy items in two agendas is not necessarily alike.


[Table 1 about here]


To illustrate the scale and nature of associations between the two variables, figure 1 shows two scatterplots: one for the second semester of 2003 (low to moderate rho and tau) and one for the second semester of 2012 (higher rho and tau). The plots include the best fitting linear regression lines – the dashed one is based on all policy areas, and the solid one excludes foreign policy and defence (the difference in slopes demonstrates the dramatic impact the inclusion of this policy field has for our estimate of the associations). The figure makes it clear that in the first half of 2012 the European Council pays much more attention to economic issues and employment with the effect of driving up the correlation with the public list of priorities which has these two on top. At the same time, there are significant remaining discrepancies, with the European Council still focusing more on foreign policy and defence than the public cares, and paying too little attention to inflation given its high importance in the eyes of the public.


[Figure 1 about here]


The investigation of the contemporaneous association between the public and the European Council agendas lead us to the conclusions that overall there is a moderate positive relationship between the two. However, we also see that even when the product-moment correlation is high, the orderings of all issues on the two agendas are not necessarily the same.

The correlation has been much higher in the period after 2009 than in the early 2000s, and the increase is due to the European Council paying more attention to economic issues than before.[ix]

These results shed light on the question how alike the public priorities and the European Council agenda are at any single point in time. As such, they reflect a static notion of rhetorical priority correspondence, but can tell us little about responsiveness in the stronger sense of the public exerting a causal effect on the European Council agenda. An examination of the dynamic co-evolution of individual policy issues prioritization over time can provide an additional perspective.

*Part B. Dynamic associations and responsiveness*

The investigation of the dynamic relationship between public opinion and the European Council agenda is complicated by two issues peculiar to time-series data – namely autocorrelation and non-stationary, and by the ever-present threat of omitted variables. Taken at face value, the correlation between the two variables in levels is moderately high at 0.38 and the associated p-values[x] would pass tests of statistical significance in four out of the twelve policy areas (see Table 2). These numbers, however, are prone to the problem of spurious correlation since the time series are non-stationary and public opinion in particular is very strongly (positively) auto-correlated. The correlation in levels reported in table 2 indicates that when a higher percentage of the public considers, say, employment, to be one of the two most important problems *relative to time periods before and after the survey*, the European Council tends to dedicate a larger share of its agenda to the topic of employment *relative to time periods before and after the semester* in which the survey was taken. But if the public prioritization or the European Council agenda or both change only very slowly and the changes are not independent between successive periods, the apparent correlations between the two time-series would tend to over-estimate the extent to which they are actually related. To address the potential problem of

spurious correlation, it is instructive to look at the correlation between the period-to-period changes in the two time series. That is, we would expect, if a true relationship exists, to observe an increase in the amount of attention to, say, taxation in the European Council when the public prioritization of the issue goes up compared to the previous survey.

A correlation in first differences would be a harder test for association between two time series, but one that is subject to a smaller extent to the threat of spurious correlation.[xi] Columns four and five of Table 2 report the correlation and associated p-values between the first differences of the two sets of time series.

[Table 2 about here]

The correlation tends to be positive but is on average much smaller and is not statistically significant in all but two policy areas (at the 0.10 level).[xii] The low-to-moderate correlations between the levels of the two variables across the 13 issues coupled with the lack of correlations between their changes imply that there can be little dynamic responsiveness. The data is consistent with a picture in which periods of relatively higher public attention to a policy coincide on average with periods in which the European Council pays relatively more attention to the same policy (relative to other time periods, not to other policies), but short-term changes in prioritization and attention are not synchronized.[xiii] The level of EU competences in the different issue areas does not seem to play a role when it comes to explaining variation in the level of association between them.

Figure 2 illustrates these relationships for one policy area, law and crime. The top panel shows the trends in public prioritization (importance) and in the relative share of attention to the topic in the European Council over time. The panel below displays the scale first differences: the changes from one period to the next one. The bottom-left panel shows the

scatterplot of the observations with the linear regression line included, while the bottom-right panel shows the scatterplot of the first differences.

[Figure 2 about here]

Laws and crime is, in fact, a policy area in which the correlation in levels is moderately high (0.35), but there is low correlation between the first differences. This implies that in the long-term higher relative prioritization of the issue tends to go with higher relative share to the topic in the European Council, but that the short-term, period to period, movements of the two time series are not related in direction or scale.

*Part C. Adding problem indicators to the responsiveness quest*

The problems of inferring rhetorical political responsiveness from the patterns of associations between the public list of priorities and the European Council agenda across issues and over time are only compounded by the possibility of omitted variables that potentially confound the relationship. The most obvious possible confounder, although not one easy to measure, is the underlying intensity of the policy problem which could be driving both shifts in the public perception of the most important problems and in the European Council attention.

Since the cross-sectional and time-series correlations hinted at some degree of correspondence between the public and the European Council priorities when it comes to economic problems broadly conceived, it is worth exploring the possibility of omitted variables for these issues. In addition, we will examine two non-economic issue area – terrorism and

immigration – which exhibit high correlations in levels and for which we can operationalize and measure the intensity of the underlying policy problem.

For the three economic issue areas – economics, employment, and inflation – we operationalize the potential omitted variable – the intensity of the policy problem – as the (EU-averaged) GDP decline, unemployment rate, and inflation rate change, respectively, all derived from Eurostat. For terrorism, we use the number of terrorist acts per time period from the RAND terrorism dataset. For immigration, we use the total annual number of immigrants in the EU-25, derived from Eurostat.

Figure 3 plots the three time series together for each of the five areas (note that all variables are standardized to have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one). The figure already hints that the three series tend to move together, and that public opinion in particular rather closely and rapidly tracks fluctuations in the economic indicators.


[Figure 3 about here]


To examine in a more formal way the links between the three variables, we can regress the share of attention to an issue in the European Council on public importance (the share of people considering the issue one of the two most important problem) and the underlying scale of the policy problem. Since the outcome variable is a fraction (i.e. can have a value in the range between 0 and 1, including the extremes) and is not normally distributed, we use fractional logit models, which are appropriate for proportions data (Papke and Wooldridge 1996). The models use heteroskedasticity robust standard errors.[xiv]

Alternative specifications like OLS and tobit give similar results.[xv] Table 3 reports the results of the fractional logit regressions. All models include a lagged outcome variable as a control for auto-correlation.

[Table 3 about here]


The coefficients for public importance are positive in four of the five models. The significance values of the positive coefficients range between 0.10 and 0.03, and in three of the cases are below the 0.05 level. This provides some evidence for an association between the levels of public prioritization of issues over time and the share of attention that the European Council devotes to these issues. Importantly, this association holds after indicators about the underlying scale of the problem and the previous values of the outcome variables are included in the models. In fact, only in the case of immigration, the scale of the problem appears to be significant but we should be reminded that some of the policy indicators are available for only a subset of all observations (terrorism, 2003-2009 and immigration 2003-2012) and that some are available only at yearly and not half-yearly intervals (immigration rate and GDP decline).

The estimated effect sizes of public prioritization are rather small. The marginal effects of this variable when the rest are held at their means range from 0.06 (in the case of economics) to 0.04 (terrorism), 0.02 (immigration), 0.002 (inflation), and -0.01 (unemployment). For reference, the standard deviations of Council attention shares for these areas are 0.10, 0.04, 0.06, 0.005, and 0.04, respectively. These marginal effects imply that for a change of public prioritization from the minimum to the maximum observed values, the expected European Council attention share increases with 19 percentage points in the case of economics, 22 percentage points in the case of terrorism, 10 percentage points in the case of immigration and less than 2 percentage points in the case of inflation[xvi].

It should also be pointed out that the threat of spurious regression remains, since four of the five time-series modelled in Table 3 do not pass stationarity tests (with the possible exception of terrorism). In essence, we can cautiously conclude that for some policy issue areas,

there is tentative evidence that public prioritization and European Council attention shares are related. But since the public prioritization tracks rather closely the underlying indicators of the scale of the underlying policy problems, at least in the case of economic issues, it is hard to disentangle the precise causal relationships in the data and to identify any independent causal effects. The statistical inferences are complicated by the auto-correlations in the data, the relatively short time series, the bounded nature of the outcome variable, and the uncertain and perhaps varying across issue areas lag structure of the relationships.

Reverse causation is also theoretically possible (Eulau and Karps 1977), i.e. public priorities may respond to the shifting share of attention that issues receive in the European Council. While the European Council is not too prominent in national news, it still gets some media coverage, and this coverage might send a signal to the public that some issues are urgent and important, and the public can adjust what it considers the most pressing issues in view of this signal.

To explore this possibility, we estimated issues-level OLS regressions for the same five topics with public opinion as the outcome variable and the lagged value of public opinion, the scale of the policy problem, and the lagged value of European Council attention share as predictors. If European Council attention share influenced public priorities according to the mechanisms described above, we would expect to see a positive and significant coefficient for this variable in the models of public opinion. However, we did not find statistical evidence for such an effect in any of the five models.

**Conclusion**

Political responsiveness in the multi-level context of the EU is a complex issue due to the difficulties in transmitting information between the public and the political decision makers, many of whom cannot be kept democratically accountable. Our study adds to the limited body

of existing literature by conducting the first analysis of rhetorical responsiveness in this context, focusing on the link between public opinion and attention rather than actual policy outputs in a study of dynamic agenda representation of the European Council. Attention is particularly important in a multi-level context, such as the EU, where decision makers at the central level may not have the competence of responding to citizens in many areas by issuing hard law.

Despite of the obstacles to political responsiveness in the EU, we find some evidence of a correlation between public opinion and the attention of the European Council. When we exclude foreign policy, there is a moderate contemporaneous positive correlation between public priorities and the political agenda. Moreover, this correlation has increased over time indicating a closer relationship between priorities and attention in the 2009-14 period than in the 2003-2008 period. However, we also see that there are substantial differences in how the public and the European Council prioritize the different policies. The latter still puts a high emphasis on foreign policy and defence and directs less attention to other issues, which figure prominently on the agenda of the public.

When we look at the dynamic co-evolution of policy priorities and attention over time, the results are less optimistic. When controlling for the intensity of the underlying policy problems, our findings seem to point into the direction of a causal effect between public priorities and the European Council agenda. For several topic areas we find evidence of a relationship between opinion and attention even when the intensity of the policy problem is controlled for. However, the dangers of spurious results remains, since the majority of our regressions do not pass stationarity tests.

Moreover, a visual inspection of the data shows that that there is a relationship between not only priorities and attention but also between the intensity of the underlying policy problems and the fluctuations in opinion and attention. This pattern is particularly prominent with respect to the socio-economic issues in which public opinion is closely related to fluctuations in socio-

economic indicators. As the economic crisis took shape, the attention of both the public and the European Council towards economic and employment issues increased. Overall this provides some evidence that changes in the underlying policy problems could be driving both changes in public priorities and the attention of the European Council. Hence, we cannot completely rule out that the EU decision makers may actually be responding to varying intensity in the underlying policy problems rather than the public, especially in socio-economic domains.

Furthermore, both the synchronic and the diachronic analyses do not indicate systematic differences in the degree of responsiveness between policy areas in which the level of EU competence varies. This is not surprising considering that the European Council has substantial leeway in selecting the topics it wishes to discuss and is by no means bounded by EU jurisdictions. In practice, the Heads of State or Government spend a considerable amount of their collective time in the EU top arena on issues such as macroeconomic policy coordination and common positions and actions in the foreign policy domain. In many areas where no EU legislation can be made in Brussels, the European Council thus plays a key role in negotiating soft law measures and monitoring their implementation via benchmarking and peer review.

Our findings underline the complex role of the Heads of State or Government in the European Council, who are not only expected to be responsive to their European electorates but also to respond to issues of political urgency. Our conclusions are restricted to the EU, a political system in which the mechanisms of responsiveness may function differently from national contexts. Yet, by emphasizing the need to control for the size of the underlying policy problems our results may have implications for the specification of models of responsiveness in such systems as well.

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[i] The latter function was introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon, which entered into force in December 2009.

[ii] It is only required to present reports to the European Parliament after its meetings, as well as an annual report.

[iii] Initially, justice and home affairs matters were also part of this group but later jurisdictions were gradually transferred towards the Commission and the co-legislators.

[iv] Another option is to consider the number of statements in the Conclusions. However, we rely on the notion that policy venues have scarce attention and allocating more attention to one issue constrains the space on the agenda for other matters (Jones and Baumgartner 2005).Overall, the correlation between relative attention (share from all statements) and absolute attention number of statements is 0.89.

[v] Error correction models require that either both time-series are stationary, or that if they are non-stationary are cointegrated. Augmented Dickey-Fuller Tests indicate that none of the issue-level public opinion series and only few of the European Council attention series are stationary. At the same time, Phillips–Ouliaris Cointegration Tests show no traces of co-integration between the two time series.

[vi] Theoretically, it is plausible that the European Council reacts within the temporal boundaries of the same semester to levels and shifts in public prioritization, which is usually measured towards the beginning of the semester. This is so especially if the European Council is assumed to react not to the published estimates of public opinion but to the underlying social processes that lead to these opinions.

[vii] Another policy area which did not consistently feature across the whole period is energy. It was added to the list of possible MIP response categories in the second half of 2006. From the beginning of 2012 energy was merged with environment. We have matched this to the European Council attention data, which covers both environment and energy since 2012.

[viii] Kendall's tau is less sensitive to error and provides more accurate p-values with small samples compared to Spearman's rho.

[ix] The correlations are almost the same when the data is aggregated per year instead of per semester.

[x] The reported p-values are from tests for association between paired samples.

[xi] This is because most of the time series in the two sets become stationary when expressed in first differences (eight of the public opinion series and all but two of the attention data).

[xii] Calculating the Pearson correlations with number of statements in the Conclusions (instead of the share of attention) yields even lower values for most of the policy areas. The significance levels are generally the same apart from economics which remains under the 0.10 significance level and foreign policy and defence which becomes significant at the 0.05 level.

[xiii] The correlation in differences does not improve if one of the two differenced time series is lagged.

[xiv] Unusually, for the five models reported in Table 3, the robust standard errors are actually smaller than the conventional ones, probably due to higher variance of the residuals for average values of the predictors.

[xv] An important difference is found for the case of terrorism, where both OLS and tobit yield non-significant results.

[xvi] In order to explore the possibility that the reaction to policy problems by the political elite is mediated by how high priority the public attaches to them, we run the same fractional logit models with an interaction term between the opinion and problem variables. The results are mixed and do not show a consistent pattern between the policy areas that would allow us to determine whether the effect of the severity of the underlying policy problem varies between different levels of opinion. Importantly, we need to interpret these results carefully given that the low number of observations hinders a systematic examination of such deep interactions with confidence.

**Table 1. Contemporaneous correlations between public prioritization of policy issues and European Council attention to the corresponding issues**

| Time period | 13 Policy issues | | 12 Policy issues (excluding foreign policy and defence) | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | *Pearson's rho* | *Kendall's tau-b* | *Pearson's rho* | *Kendall's tau-b* |
| 2003.1 | -0.08 | 0.06 | 0.36 | 0.20 |
| 2003.2 | -0.23 | 0.12 | 0.41 | 0.33 |
| 2004.1 | -0.18 | 0.03 | 0.27 | 0.24 |
| 2004.2 | -0.15 | 0.03 | 0.16 | 0.25 |
| 2005.1 | 0.00 | 0.09 | 0.38 | 0.31 |
| 2005.2 | -0.31 | -0.19 | -0.05 | -0.02 |
| 2006.1 | 0.09 | 0.00 | 0.56 | 0.21 |
| 2006.2 | -0.29 | -0.04 | 0.16 | 0.14 |
| 2007.1 | -0.31 | -0.13 | -0.21 | 0.00 |
| 2007.2 | -0.39 | -0.18 | -0.06 | -0.03 |
| 2008.1 | -0.35 | -0.26 | -0.10 | -0.12 |
| 2008.2 | -0.25 | -0.12 | 0.16 | 0.05 |
| 2009.1 | -0.02 | -0.16 | 0.53* | 0.00 |
| 2009.2 | -0.11 | -0.11 | 0.08 | 0.07 |
| 2010.1 | 0.48 | -0.16 | 0.56* | -0.03 |
| 2010.2 | 0.05 | -0.11 | 0.42 | 0.05 |
| 2011.1 | 0.27 | 0.03 | 0.43 | 0.18 |
| 2011.2 | 0.35 | -0.19 | 0.62** | -0.06 |
| 2012.1 | - | - | 0.78*** | 0.19 |
| 2012.2 | - | - | 0.66** | 0.47* |
| 2013.1 | - | - | 0.61** | 0.26 |
| 2013.2 | - | - | 0.76*** | 0.41 |
| 2014.1 | - | - | 0.07 | 0.09 |
| **Average** | **-0.08** | **-0.07** | **0.33** | **0.14** |

Notes: The topic energy was added to the catalogue of response options in the MIP question in the second half of 2006, wherefore the correlations in the period 2003.1 to 2006.1 feature one policy area less. Since 2012 energy was merged with environment as a response option in the MIP question. Therefore, the number of issue areas in the last five time points is 11. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p > 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

**Figure 1. Contemporaneous associations between the public's list of priorities and the European Council agenda at two points in time**
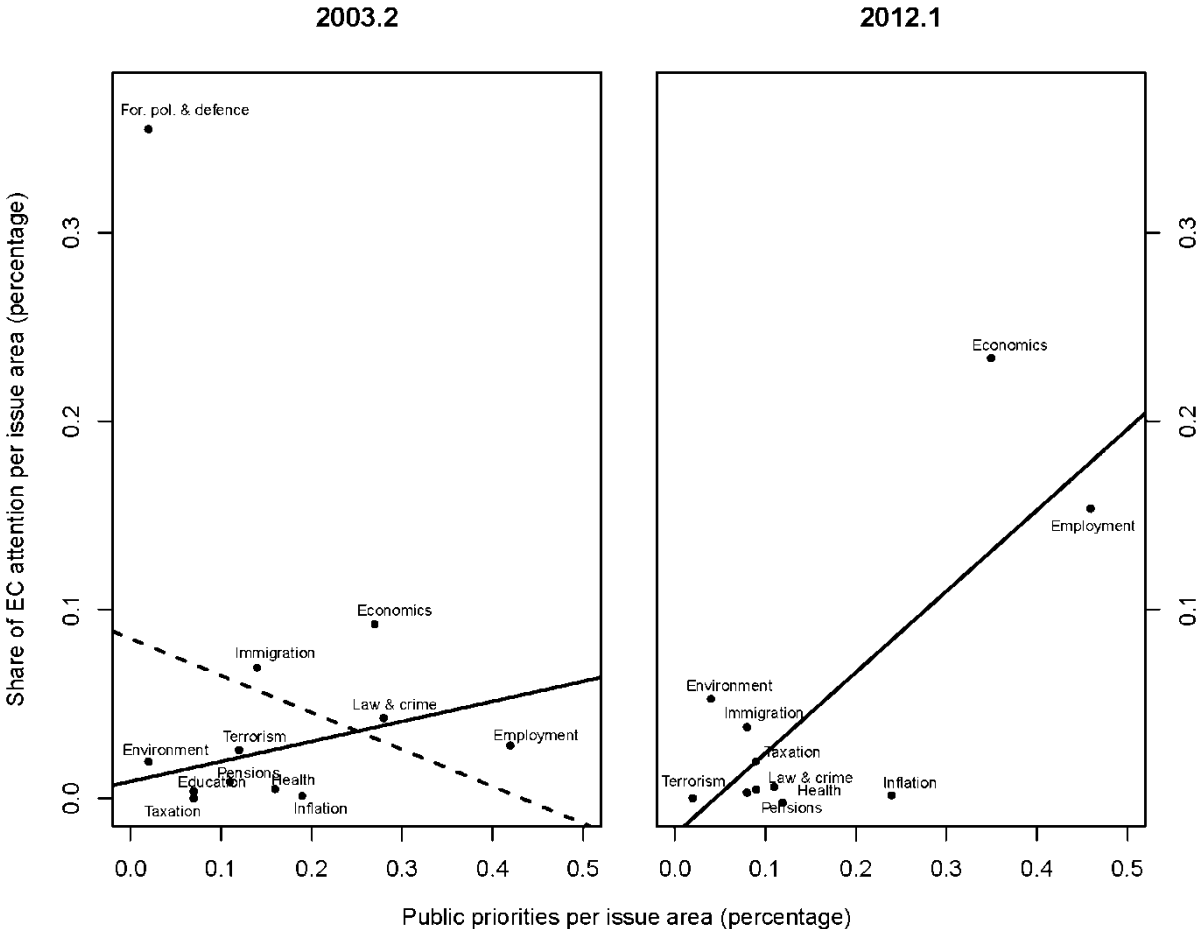


Note: The dashed line shows the linear regression line for 12 issues. The solid line excludes foreign policy.
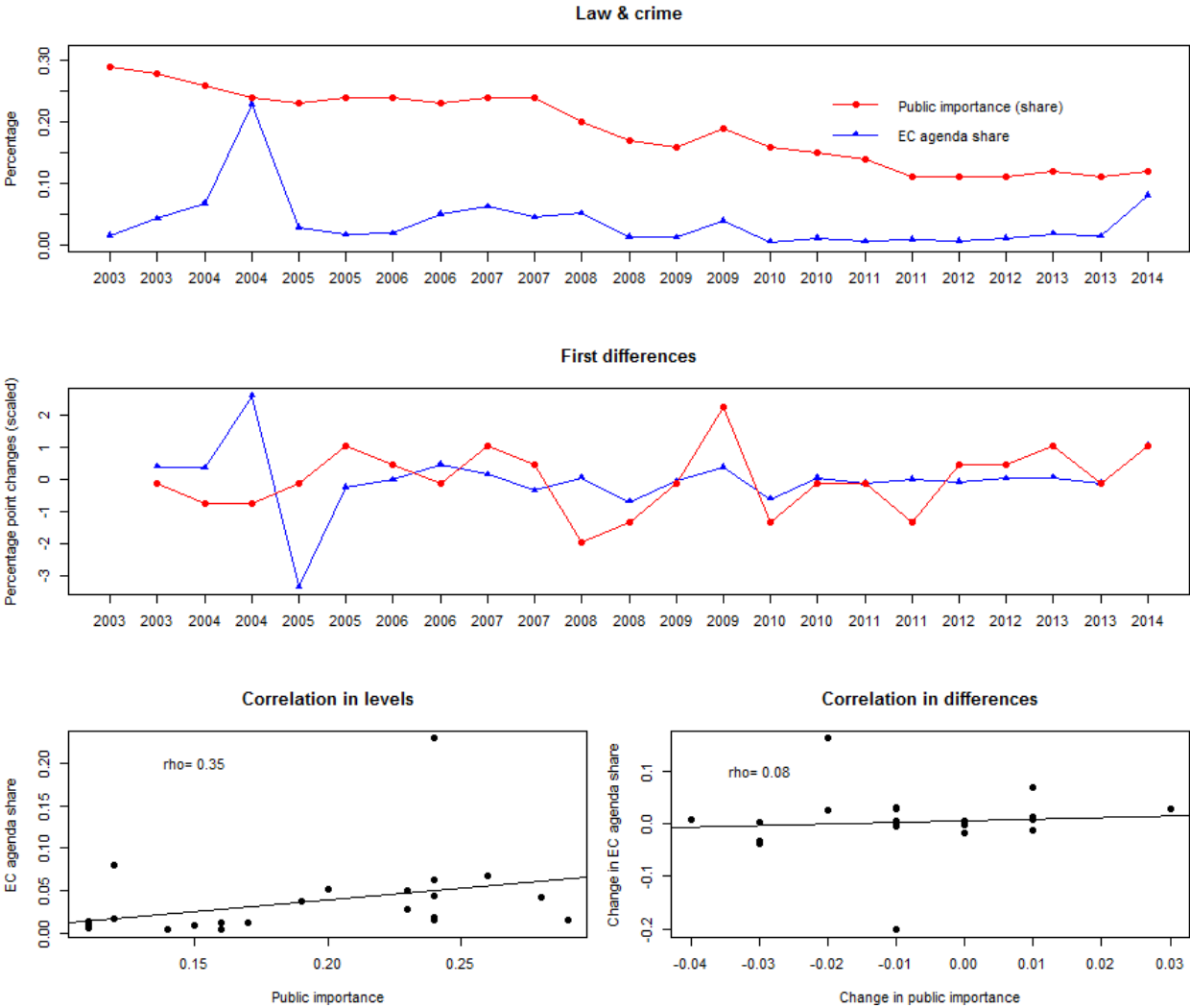
**Table 2. Correlations between public prioritization of policy issues and European Council attention to the corresponding issues (2003.1-2014.1)**

| Policy issue | Levels | | First differences | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *correlation* | *p-value* | *correlation* | *p-value* |
| Economics | 0.58 | <0.01 | -0.1 | 0.66 |
| Education | 0.19 | 0.38 | 0.32 | 0.15 |
| Employment | 0.30 | 0.16 | 0.30 | 0.17 |
| Energy | 0.50 | 0.12 | 0.44 | 0.21 |
| Environment (and energy since 2012) | 0.31 | 0.15 | -0.01 | 0.96 |
| Foreign policy & defence | 0.21 | 0.41 | 0.12 | 0.66 |
| Health | 0.42 | 0.05 | 0.24 | 0.28 |
| Immigration | 0.55 | <0.01 | 0.36 | 0.10 |
| Inflation | 0.67 | <0.01 | 0.45 | 0.03 |
| Law & crime | 0.35 | 0.11 | 0.08 | 0.73 |
| Pensions | -0.07 | 0.76 | 0.07 | 0.77 |
| Taxation | 0.33 | 0.12 | -0.14 | 0.52 |
| Terrorism | 0.65 | <0.01 | 0.44 | 0.04 |
| **Average** | **0.38** | | **0.20** | |

Note: The data for energy covers the period 2006.2 – 2011.2 only. The data for foreign policy and defence covers the period 2003.1 – 2011.2.

**Figure 2. Percentage of the public who consider crime one of the two most important problems and relative attention to the policy area in the European Council (2003.1-2014.1)**



Note: Time series plot in levels (top panel), time series in first differences (scaled, middle) and correlations between the levels (bottom-left) and first differences (bottom-right) of the variables

**Figure 3. Public priorities, European Council agenda dynamics, and policy problems over time**
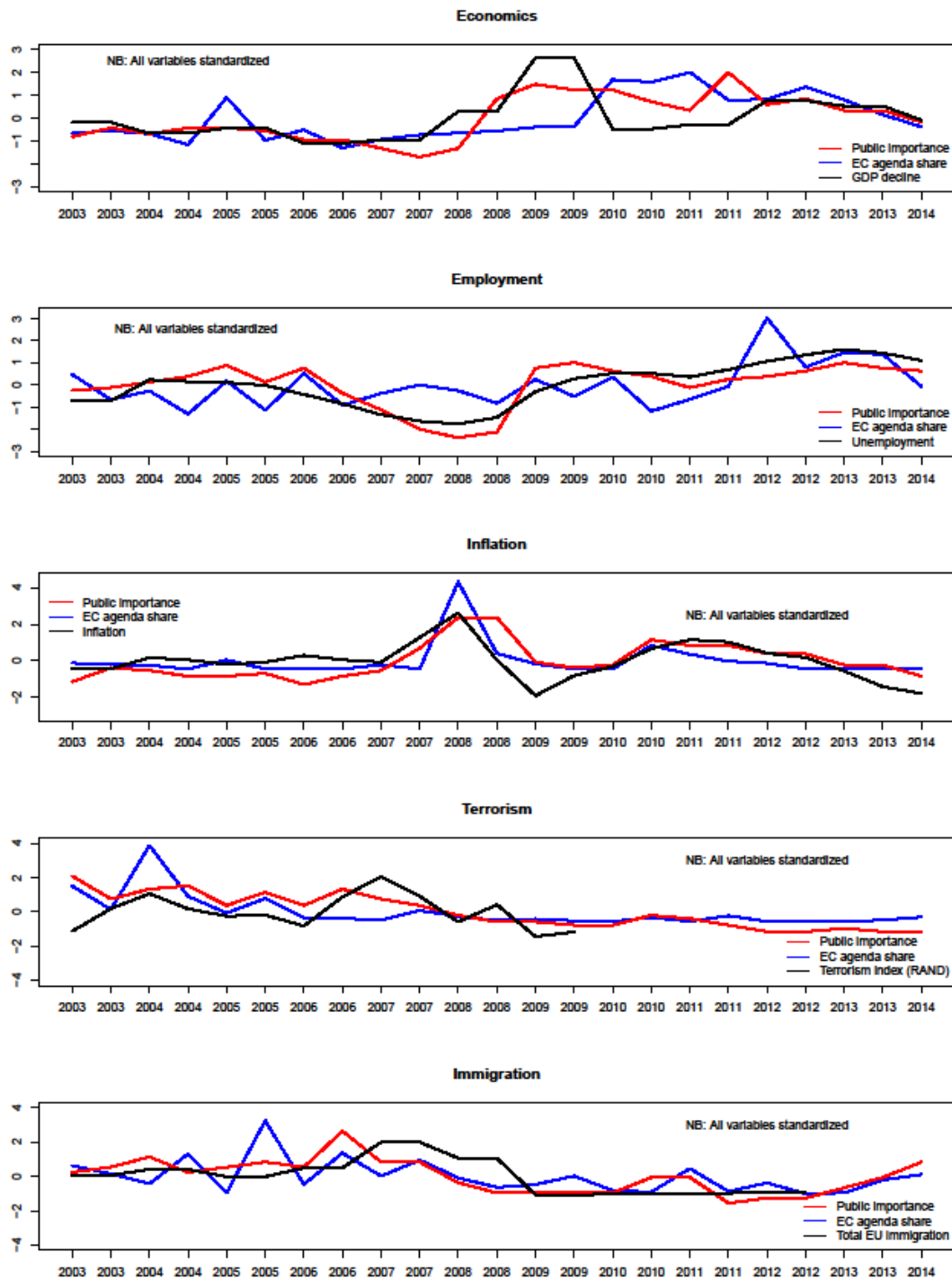
**Table 3. Fractional logits regression models of European Council attention share to a policy issue in a semester (2003.I -2014.I).**

| | Economics | Immigration | Inflation | Terrorism | Unemployment |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Coef.* *(st. error)* | *Coef.* *(st. error)* | *Coef.* *(st. error)* | *Coef.* *(st. error)* | *Coef.* *(st. error)* |
| Public importance | 0.40' (0.24) | 0.37** (0.14) | 1.23** (0.41) | 1.68** (0. 65) | -0.23 (0.27) |
| Scale of the policy problem | -0.14 (0.17) | 0.38* (0.17) | 0.12 (0.35) | -0.03 (0.40) | 0.60' (0.31) |
| Lagged European Council agenda | 2.64 (1.79) | -11.87* (5.69) | -59.64 (39.23) | -2.98 (5.63) | -2.74 (3.59) |
| Intercept | -2.22*** (0.34) | -2.18*** (0.36) | -6.96*** (0.29) | -4.73*** (0.23) | -2.88*** (0.25) |
| *N* | *22* | *19* | *22* | *13* | *22* |
| *Log Pseudolikelihood* | *-6.427* | *-3.079* | *-0.242* | *-1.191* | *-3.29* |

*Notes:* The five models are estimated separately. Public importance and scale of the policy problem are z-transformed to have a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, ' $p < 0.10$