

# Book Review: Which Policy for Europe? Power and Conflict Inside the European Commission by Miriam Hartlapp, Julia Metz, and Christian Rauh

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*Aimed at academics and students interested in European integration, this book is based on comprehensive new data from insider interviews, internal Commission documents and an the first database on personal and structural Commission features since its founding days. This is a timely and rigorous contribution, finds Muireann O'Dwyer.*

**Which Policy for Europe? Power and Conflict Inside the European Commission. Miriam Hartlapp, Julia Metz, and Christian Rauh. Oxford University Press. 2014.**

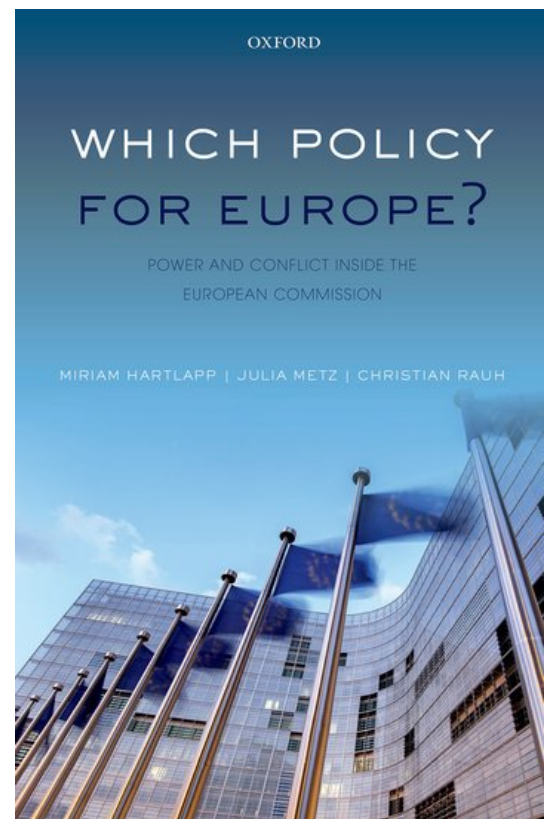
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This book seeks to explore the dynamic of decision making within the European Commission. Co-authored by Miriam Hartlapp, Julia Metz and Christian Ruath, the book sets out to examine the internal policy contest of the Commission, and as such to add an extra layer of analysis for studying EU policy making.

Rather than seeing the Commission as a unified actor, one whose position can be taken as a given in explorations of policy making at EU level, this book shows the role of politics within the Commission itself, and explores the various structural and political factors which influence the decision making process. Against the background of the increased politicisation of the EU, and the expansion of the realm of EU competences, this work is clearly very timely. This is a book that marries incredibly rich data with innovative theoretical and methodological approaches, which offers a nuanced understanding of the politics within an EU institution that can no longer be honestly described as non-political.

The books starts from a key puzzle: why is it that the European Commission proposes policies which are variably unpopular with the other actors within the EU political system, or even generates proposals which are inconsistent and even contradictory with earlier or concurrent proposals? These observations hint at a complexity that is not captured by models of EU decision making that take the Commission as a unitary actor. The central question of this book, then, asks why does the Commission come to a particular position, and how is that position formulated?

In order to explore this, the authors set out a theoretical framework based on the main competing position formation logics found in the literature. They create a typology, breaking down the conceptualisation of the Commission into three views. Firstly, is that of the Commission as a technocratic problem solver, utilising the best expertise and operating apart from politics. Secondly, the Commission as bureaucratic competence maximiser, seeking to increase its areas of influence and its relative power within the EU structure. Thirdly, the view of the Commission as an ideologically motivated policy seeker. Throughout the book it becomes clear that the evidence presented supports the latter two logics to a greater extent than the former. Indeed, the book makes a compelling argument



against the view of the Commission as non-political. Rather, they present a Commission that is very much part of the politics of the EU, influencing and being influenced by the wider political actors and circumstances.

This consideration of politics leads to the second part of the theoretical framework – that of the constraints on policy formation. These constraints are listed as, firstly, the legal status quo – the ways in which the existing legal architecture and existing legislation limits the realm of potential proposals. Second are the structures of internal co-ordination, the implications of the structure of the Commission itself, from the division of policy areas, to the hierarchy between the administration of the Commission and the more political college of Commissioners. The third aspect which constrains policy formation is the inter-institutional structure of the EU – the relationships between the Commission and the Council, Parliament, the Court of Justice and so on. The authors also offer a fourth category which acts as a catch all for the more area specific constraints: the role of organised interests, experts, and the relative individual power of actors involved. Brought together, the typology of position formation logics and the constraints on policy formation create a theoretical framework against which the case studies are examined.

This book offers a very rich exploration of the internal process of policy formation. Focusing on the lifespan of two recent Commissions, the book covers 48 cases, with each case representing a distinct policy formation. The cases are grouped under three headings: Consumer Policy, Research and Innovation Policy, and policies at the intersection of Social Policy and the Common Market. Relying on a mixture of data sources, these case studies offer an interesting insight into the work of the Commission, and form the empirical backbone of the argument.

Following on from the case studies, the book develops an analysis of the Commission as a whole, drawing out key characteristics of the internal policy creation process. The three aspects discussed are the role of expert groups, the influence of public opinion and public acceptability, and the question of whether there are structural biases inherent in the internal co-ordination of the Commission. It is in these chapters that the thick description provided by the case studies can really be brought to bear. Each addresses a key question about how decisions are made in the Commission, and as they follow on from the focused specificity of the case studies, the analysis here is very well grounded in the empirical data. The question of whether or not there are structural biases within the Commission is a crucial one. Given the debates over the “joint decision trap”, whereby negative integration is seen as outpacing positive integration as a result of the structure of the EU, to find a similar structural bias within one of the key institutions would further the concern over the market bias in EU policy making. The analysis offered here is quite nuanced – rather than making an overall claim, the book highlights the ways in which the interaction between different policy domains, as well as between the administrative and political levels, does create certain biases towards particular types of integration. Further work, perhaps deepening the conversation between work of this type and the literature on the joint decision trap would be a clear next step.

Overall, this is a timely and rigorous book. Its insights are the result of an innovative theoretical approach, as well as a very rich collection of data. By successfully refuting the idea that the Commission can be viewed as a unitary actor, this book has clear implications for the study of European policymaking more broadly. As more and more important decisions are taken at the European level, it is academics, activists and politicians who should be paying close attention to these arguments.

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