

How support from other Member States affects influence in the Council of the European Union



Numerous studies have attempted to measure the relative bargaining power that each EU member state has when making decisions in the Council of the European Union. But as [Klaas Staal](#) writes, the extent to which a state's preferences match those of other member states can be just as important as its bargaining power. Drawing on data from a new study, he illustrates that large states such as Germany, Poland, and the UK regularly take positions that are against the majority, while the change in Council voting weights from the Nice to the Lisbon Treaty can also only be understood by measuring the change in voting weights for a state's most frequent allies.



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Governments seek to promote national interests on the world stage with an amalgam of military, political, and economic means. In a [new study](#), I examine, together with [Marco Fantini](#), how Member States manage to promote national interests in the European Union. The European Parliament and the Council of Ministers both vote on proposals made by the European Commission. While the Parliament is the institution that represents EU citizens, the Council is designed as the platform in which national governments represent national interests. The Council is thus of prime interest when studying the role of national interests in EU decision making.

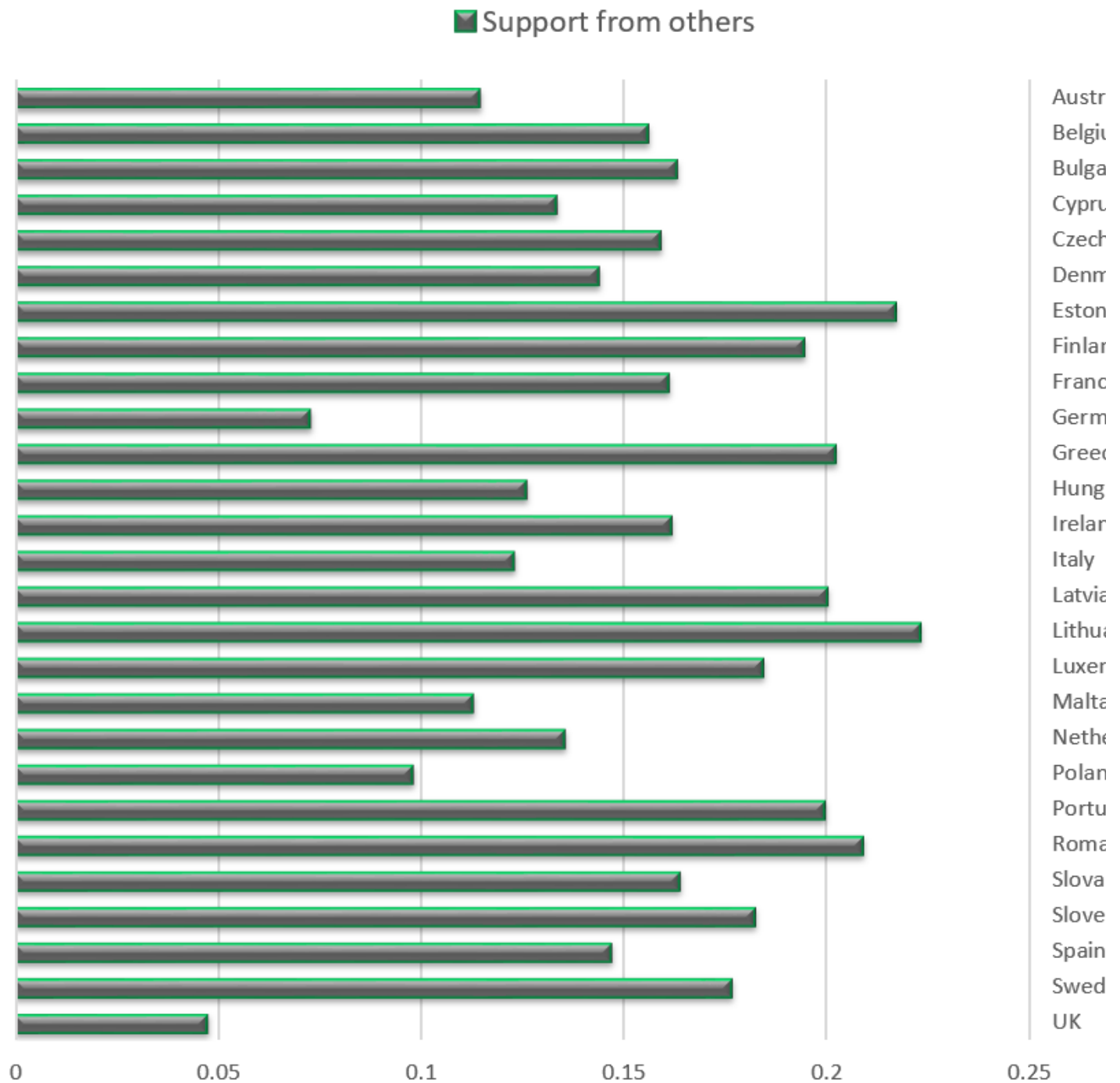
Traditionally, studies of influence on decision making, and thus the promotion of national interest, are based on Banzhaf and Shapley voting power indexes. In our contribution, we address two theoretical shortcomings in the traditional approach. Firstly, these approaches ignore policy preferences, and secondly, Member States can express dissent not only with a no-vote, but also with an abstention (in our paper, we additionally discuss the role of vote statements that national governments can use to express dissent over a Commission's proposal in the Council).

We consider the votes cast in the Council under the Treaty of Nice, using the information that can be found in the Monthly Summary of Council Acts published by the Council Secretariat. From February 2004 until December 2012, there were 1,762 votes. In 585 of these, one or more Member States did not support the Commission's proposal with an unconditional yes-vote. As the amount of dissent expressed by a no-vote is not twice as large as the amount expressed by an abstention, one has to use a non-parametric measure to describe the alignment in voting behaviour between two Member States. We therefore calculate [Spearman's rank correlation coefficient](#) using the levels of disagreement (e.g., yes-vote, abstention, no-vote) that can be found in the Monthly Summaries.

The calculated correlation coefficients thus measure the alignment of policy preferences between Member States and can therefore be used to determine the average support a Member State gets for its position in the Council. However, not only this alignment of policy preferences is of importance, but also the voting weights – having the same policy preferences as a large Member State with a big voting weight gives more substantial support for one's positions than lining up with a smaller Member State with a lower voting weight. We therefore measure the support a Member State gets by the sum of the voting weights (the amount of the support received) weighted by Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (the extent to which/how often this support is received). This measure of support not only gives insights into the influence of Member States on decision-making, but also on the effects changes in voting weights have on these levels of influence.

Two findings stand out. First, the traditional literature based on voting power indices, by neglecting the alignment of policy preferences between Member States, may underestimate or overestimate influence on decision making in the Council. We show that the traditional approach typically underestimates influence for the smaller Member States Estonia, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal and Romania. In contrast, the traditional approach tends to overestimate the influence of large Member States. The latter tend to take positions against the majority more often and are then outvoted. The most striking case is the United Kingdom, but this also frequently occurs to Germany and Poland. The levels of support Member States receive for their positions are depicted in Figure 1.

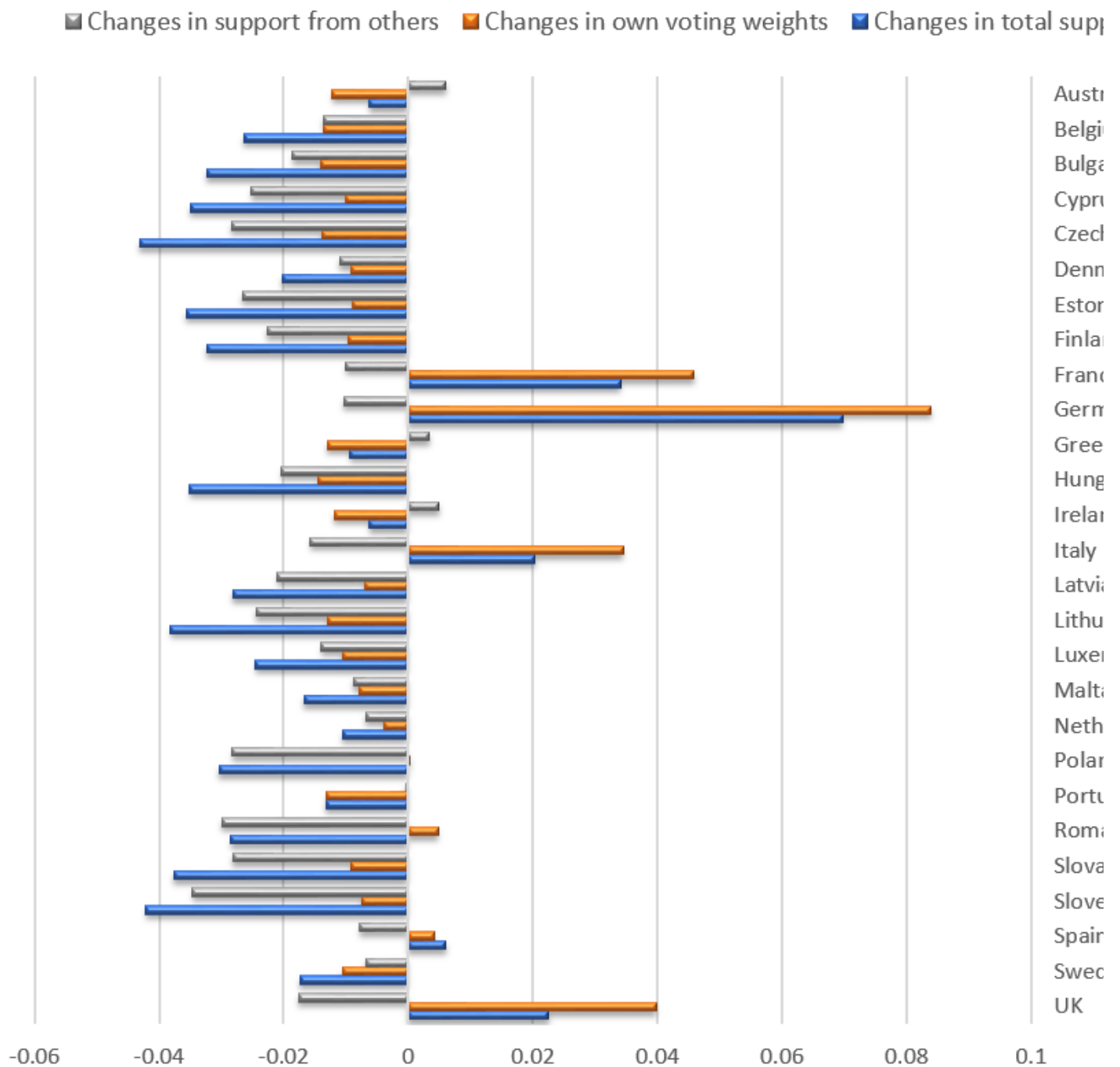
Figure 1: Support Member States receive for their position from other Member States in the Council of the European Union



Note: For more information, see the author's [accompanying study](#).

The second finding concerns the shifts in influence on decision making due to changes in voting weights from the Nice to the Lisbon Treaty. The Treaty of Lisbon increases the weights of the four biggest Member States and decreases the weights of most of the smaller countries. These shifts, however, have more intricate implications on influence on decision making than the simple changes in voting weights suggest, as illustrated in figure 2.

Figure 2: Effects of changes in voting weights in the Treaty of Lisbon



Note: For more information, see the author's [accompanying study](#).

Influence not only depends on a Member State's own vote and thus its own voting weight, but also on the support received from and thus the changes in voting weights of other Member States that tend to take similar positions in the Council. This is most obviously the case for Austria, Greece and Ireland. The Treaty of Lisbon reduced the voting weights of these Member States. This did not reduce, however, the influence of these countries on decision making as one or more of the four biggest countries gaining voting weights typically support their positions.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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