

The European Commission Where now? Where next?

Research Briefing 1: 'Federalists' and 'neoliberals'? The beliefs and values of European Commission staff

This policy briefing tests assumptions about the motivations, beliefs and values of the people who work for the Commission.

Background

The outside world is not always kind about the Commission and the people who work for it. According to accepted wisdoms, the Commission is populated by 'federalists' and 'neoliberals', who want only to expand the competencies of the EU and therefore their own power, and to impose a pro-market agenda.

Our study, 'The European Commission: Where now? Where next?' puts these beliefs to the empirical test. We asked Commission staff about their motivations, whether they would prefer policy to be made by the EU or in national capitals, and what role they would like the Commission to play in the EU system. We also asked about their economic values and where they would position themselves in terms of state and market.

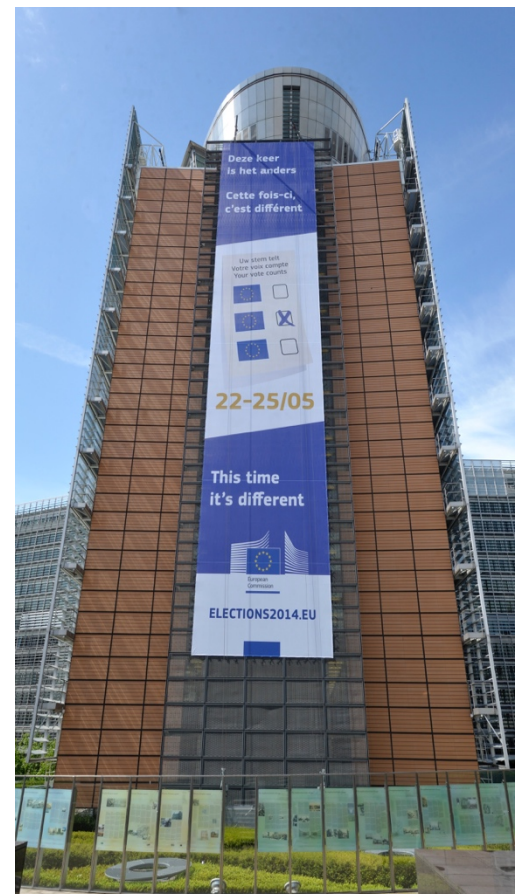
And, finally, we asked about how Commission staff view the future and what concerns them. The findings, which

we report below, challenge many preconceptions.

Motivations

What attracts people to work in the Commission? Are they motivated by federalist intent? In our survey, which was administered to all staff in the organisation, we asked what lay behind the decision to pursue a career in the Commission. Was the motivation idealistic, materialistic or pragmatic?

The results are shown in Figure 1. The most popular reasons were 'international experience' (77%) and 'commitment to Europe' (76%) suggesting mainly idealistic motivations. Factors such as pay and job stability were also important – 'competitive remuneration' (65%) and 'job stability' (43%) – as were aspects of job quality – 'I wanted a challenging job' (49%), 'professional development' (40%) and 'quality of the work' (37%) – and a 'good work life balance' (40%). We found no change in the ordering when we examined whether motivations changed over time or whether responses varied between staff according to when they were recruited (Figure 2).



For further information:

Project website:

<https://www.uea.ac.uk/political-social-international-studies/research/the-juncker-commission>

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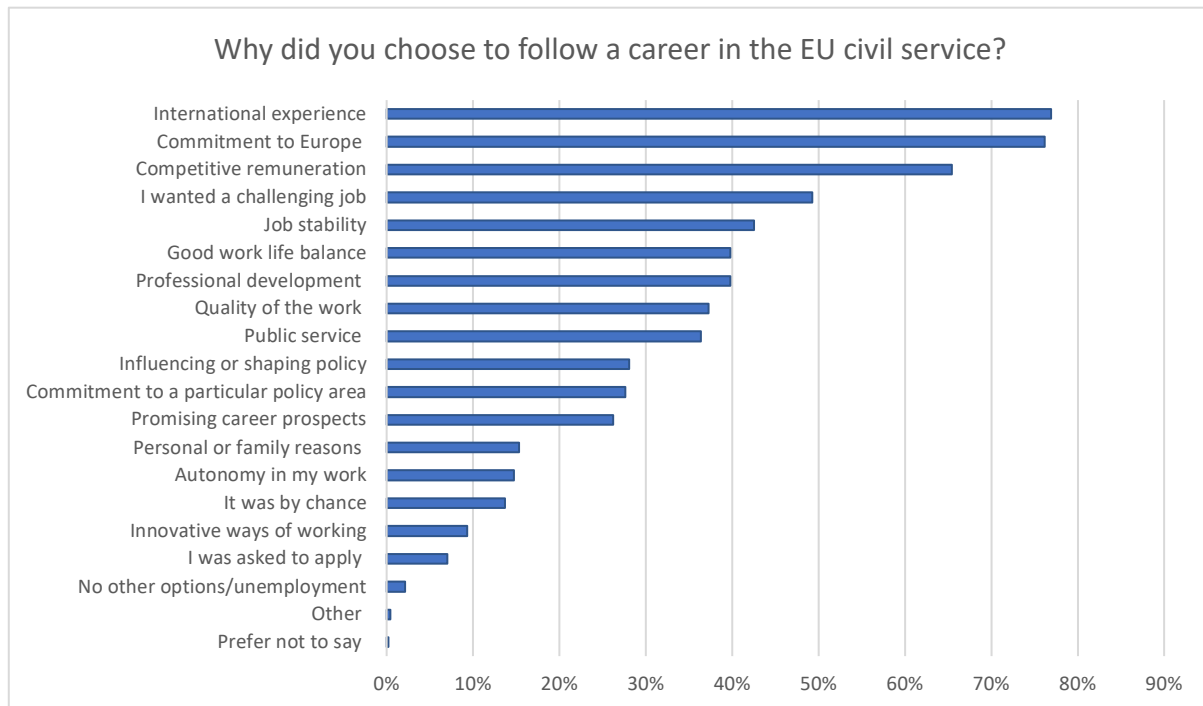
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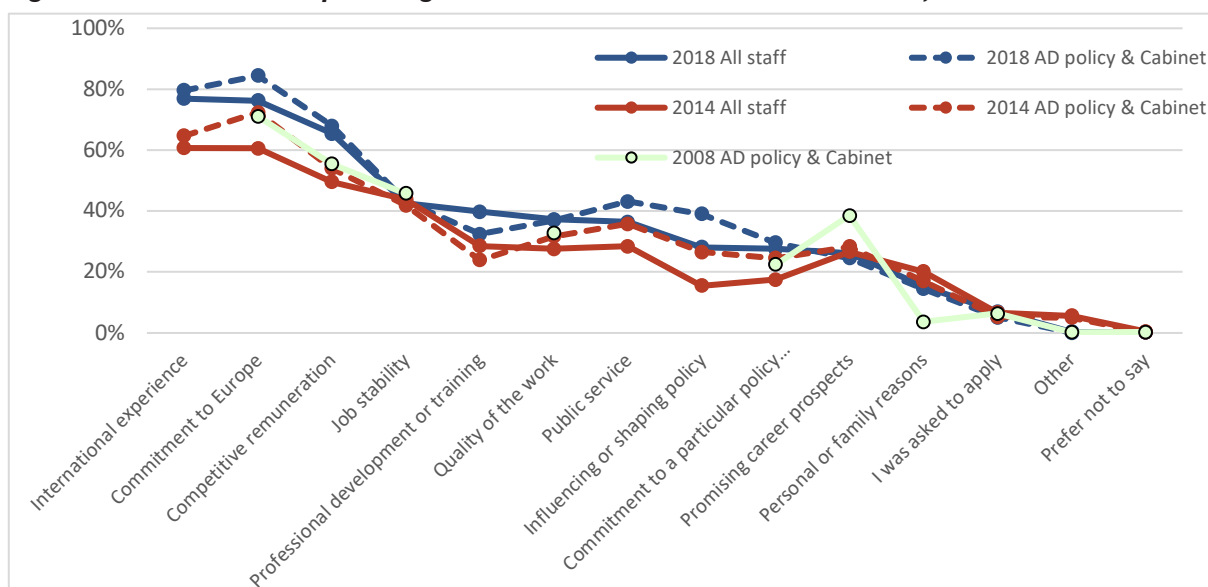
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Figure 1. Motivations for pursuing a career in the EU civil service



Note: Respondents were invited to choose as many options as applied, so % do not sum to 100.

Figure 2. Motivations for pursuing a career in the EU civil service in 2008, 2014 and 2018



Note: 1. Not all options were offered in the 2008 survey 2. Respondents were invited to choose as many options as applied, so % do not sum to 100.

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Powers

A second set of questions was designed to test whether Commission staff hold instinctively expansionist views.

We asked, first, where staff would locate themselves on a scale, where 0 is ‘I prefer that the EU is a union of sovereign states’ and 10 ‘I prefer a single supranational state’. The results show a preference for supranationalism: the average (mean) is 6.24 and the most popular positioning among staff is 7 and 8.

A comparison with the same question included in our 2014 survey suggests that there has been a marginal shift in preferences towards the EU as a supranational state over the past five years.

In regard to seven policy areas, staff were asked, to indicate on an eleven-point scale whether they think that EU competence should be increased (+5) or decreased (-5) in relation to its current powers (0). The results are shown in Figure 5.

The main finding is that, whilst there is a general preference for ‘more Europe’, responses are differentiated according to the policy area in question.

Figure 3. Would staff prefer the EU to be intergovernmental or supranational?

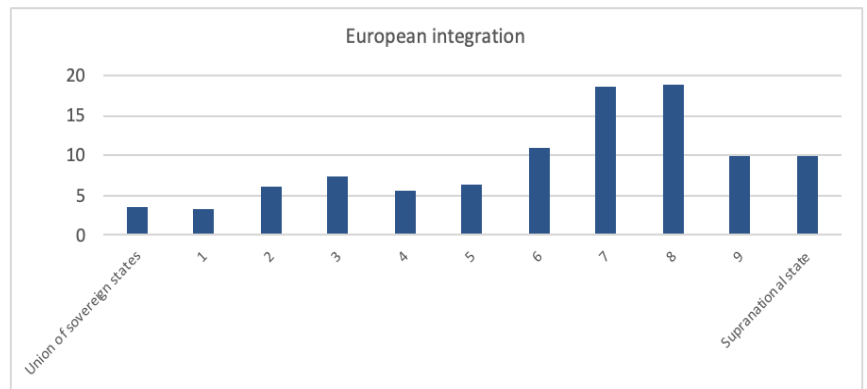
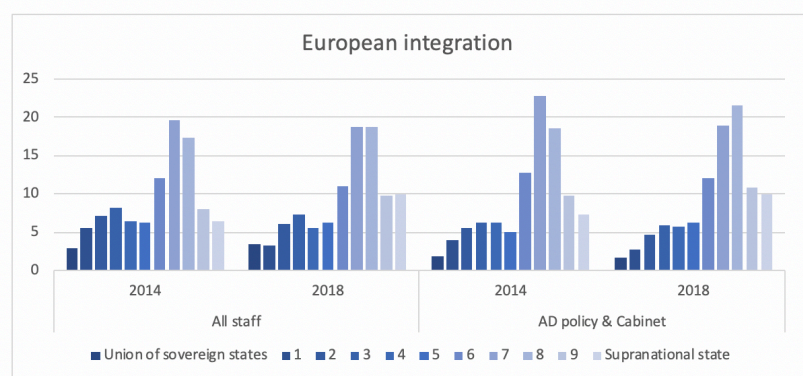
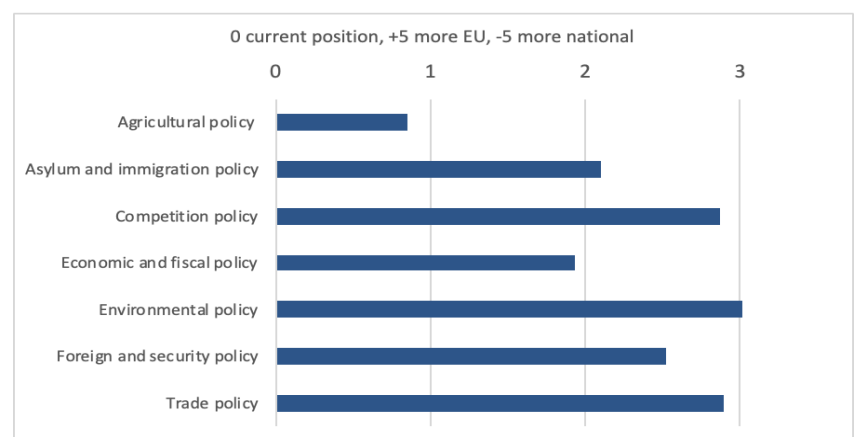


Figure 4. Would staff prefer the EU to be intergovernmental or supranational? 2014 and 2018 compared (all staff; administrators and members of cabinet)



Note: Question not asked in the 2008 survey

Figure 5. Where should decision-making authority be located?



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Governance

We were also keen to investigate what staff think about the role that the Commission should play within the EU and what sort of system they would like the EU to be.

First, although more than a third (37%) of staff agreed that the Commission should be the government of Europe, the figure was exactly matched by the number (37%) who disagreed.

Second, there was relatively little support for a shift of

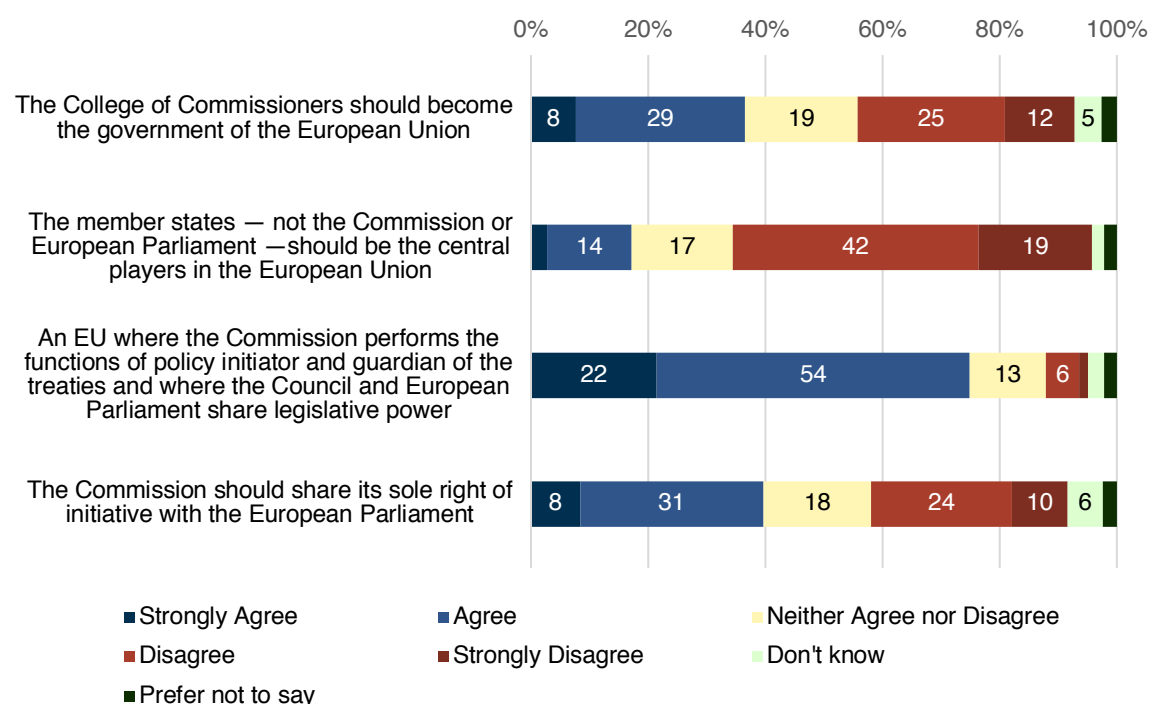
power to the member states. Only 17% agreed that the member states should be the central players in the European Union, compared to the 61% who disagreed.

Third, staff are strongly supportive of the Commission's traditional role as a policy initiator and guardian of the treaties 75% agree and only 7% disagree.

Finally, almost 40% of staff agree that the Commission should share its right of

initiative with the European Parliament. Although a third disagree, it is notable that a significant proportion of staff do not regard a monopoly over this prerogative as intrinsic to the Commission's status and see the European Parliament as a partner, rather than a rival. This reveals a significant development in attitudes towards the European Parliament over time.

Figure 6. Preference for EU governance



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Neoliberals?

The beliefs of Commission personnel became a matter of particular interest during the financial and economic crisis. There was speculation that neoliberalism within the institution accounted for a hard-line, pro-austerity position.

In our 2018 survey, and in our earlier projects in 2008 and 2014, we had sought to discover where Commission staff position themselves on the economy. On a scale where 0 is state and 10 is market, we asked staff where they would place themselves. We found, first, that economic philosophies are polarised but the average (mean) is 4.64 and the modal value is 3, suggesting a leaning towards more state involvement.

A second finding emerges from a comparison of the results from 2018 with our earlier studies. Staff in 2014 and in 2018 were significantly more likely to position themselves closer to the state end of the scale than the market end than in 2008. In other words, they were more pro-market before the crisis than after it.

Figure 7. Economic values: are staff pro-state or pro-market?

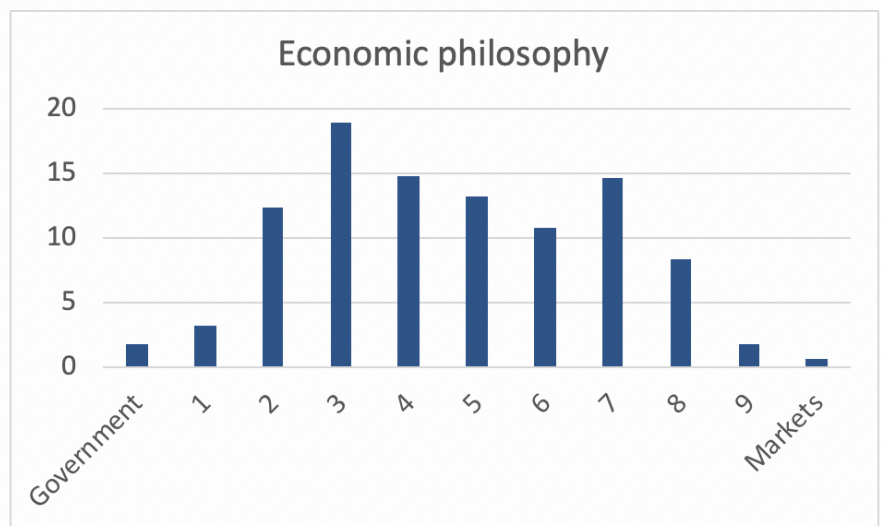
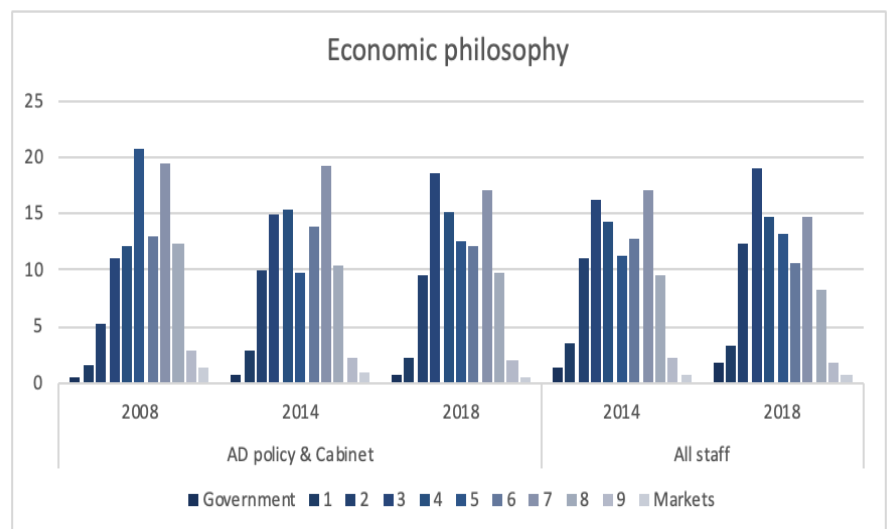


Figure 8. Economic values: are staff pro-state or pro-market? 2008, 2014 and 2018 compared.



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Looking to the future

After the financial and economic crisis, followed the ‘polycrisis’. In the survey, we asked staff about the impact of the crisis in actors and institutions (Figure 9).

None thought that any actors or institutions had lost power. However, the European Bank headed the list in terms of the perception of which institutions had become more powerful. The Eurogroup was in second place.

A second question concerned the most likely constraints on the Commission in the future. In their responses, 87 per cent identified Eurosceptic parties and populism as the most serious. The rise of illiberal democracy and migration crisis came in next at 57 and 55 per cent respectively.

Figure 9. The impact of the crisis on actors and institutions: perceptions of a shift in power

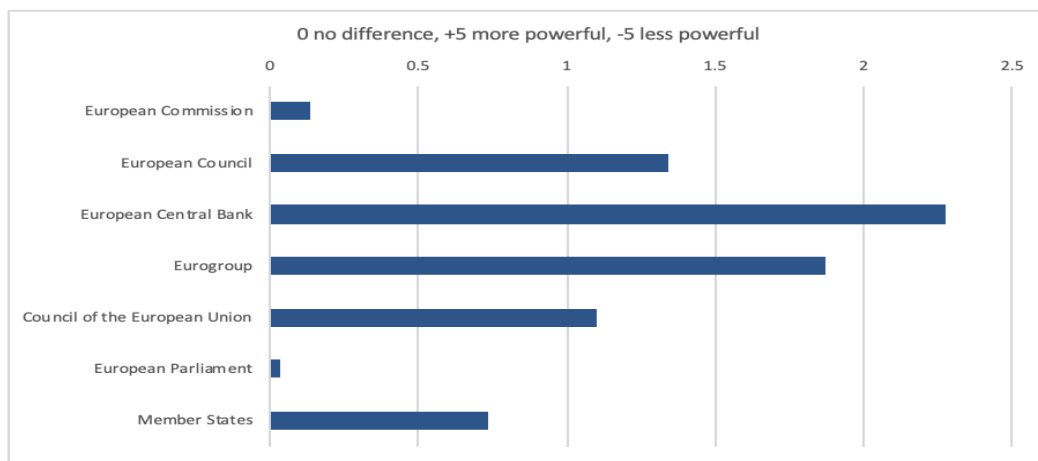
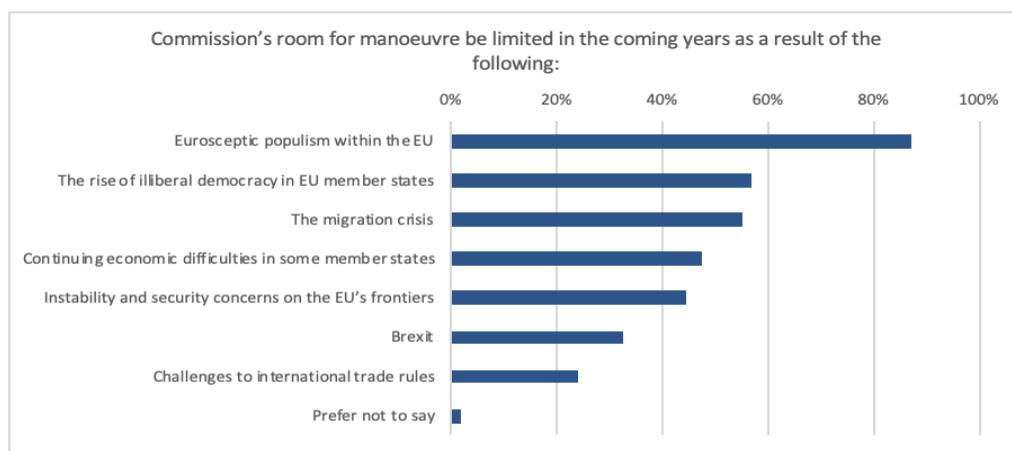
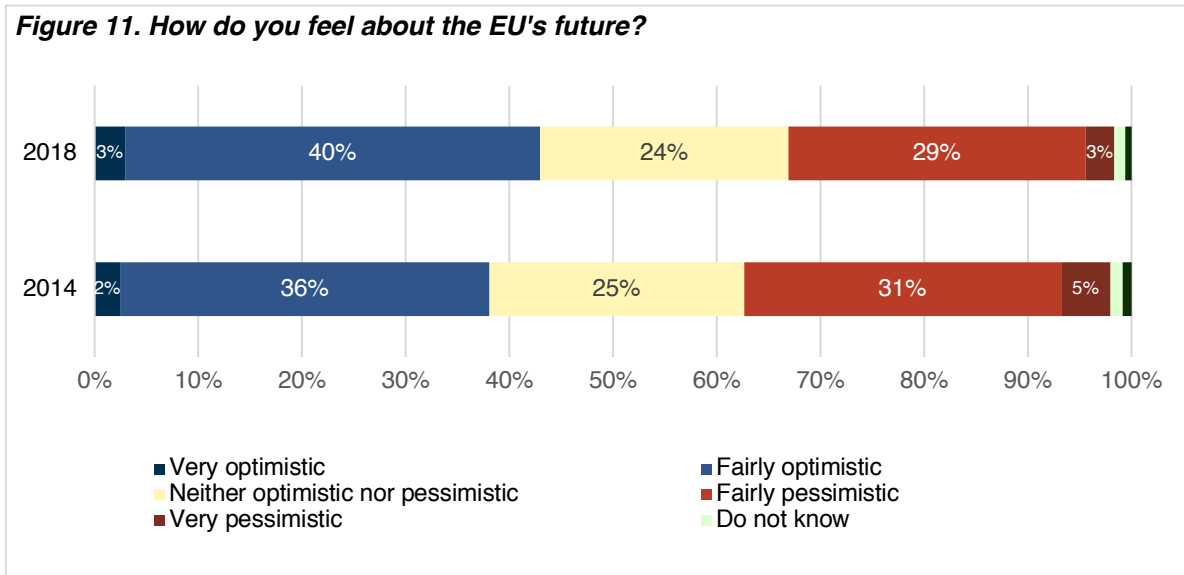


Figure 10. The Commission's room for manoeuvre



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Conclusion

The findings from ‘The European Commission: Where now? Where next?’ challenge widespread views about the Commission and its staff. Commission staff may join the organization due to idealism about Europe, but their motivation does not translate into pro-federalist values or an

instinctive desire to centralize power in Brussels. Staff favour a vision of the EU as a system where the Commission retains its traditional prerogatives as policy initiator and guardian of the treaties. Interestingly,

nearly a third would be happy to share the power of initiative with the European Parliament. There is certainly no majority or even a plurality among staff in support of an EU where the College of Commissioners forms a European government. Nor is there evidence of a generalized preference among staff for expanding EU competencies. An examination of economic values shows that Commission staff are not as pro-market as had widely been assumed. Moreover, staff are more likely to have moved towards favouring a

state intervention and away from support for the market since the financial and economic crisis. Staff thought that the ECB and the Eurogroup had emerged strongest among institutions and actions after the crisis. They identified Eurosceptic movements and public opinion as the factors most likely to constrain the Commission. Finally, despite the challenges that the EU faces, staff are more optimistic about the future in 2018 than they were in 2014.

Sara Connolly and Hussein Kassim
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About the project

'The European Commission: Where now? Where next?' is a multinational academic research project, undertaken by a multidisciplinary team. It investigates the internal structure and operation of the Commission, with a particular focus on of the 'political Commission' and the 'new ways of working'. It looks also at the background, beliefs and experience of the people who work for the Commission. The project is informed by data drawn from three sources: responses to an online survey from around 6500 respondents from across and at all levels of the Commission; a programme of more than 200 interviews, including with Commissioners, cabinet members and senior managers; and five focus groups with staff in non-managerial positions. For further information, see our [project website](#)

The project is the third to be undertaken by a team led by Professor Hussein Kassim, following '[The European Commission in Question](#)' in 2008-09 and '[The European Commission: Facing the Future](#)' in 2018. The surveys in 2014 and 2018 were circulated to all staff and the 2008 survey was sent to administrators in policy DGs and members of cabinet. Where we make comparisons across surveys, we attempt to present like-for-like results for all staff in 2014/2018 and for administrators and members of cabinet in 2008/2014/2018.

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To contact us or to subscribe to further research briefings, please email us.

'The European Commission: Where now? Where next?' Research Briefings are edited and produced by Sara Connolly and Hussein Kassim.

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