The European Commission Where now? Where next?

Research Briefing 5: Views on the 'political Commission' and the 'new ways of working'.

This briefing reports our findings on what Commission staff understood by the 'political Commission', what elements, if any, they would like to retain, their reflections on the 'new ways of working', and their evaluation of the Juncker Commission.

Background

The first Commission President to emerge from the *Spitzenkandidaten* process, Jean-Claude Juncker, signalled that his Commission would be different from its predecessors. It would be a 'political Commission' that would focus on the delivery of his Political Guidelines. The ten policy priorities that Juncker presented as candidate Commission President were based on his campaign in the EPP primary, but they also drew on the strategic agenda adopted by the European Council in June 2014 as well as exchanges with the political groups.

As part of a reorganisation of the College to ensure the delivery of his programme, the Commission President-elect appointed seven Vice Presidents to lead project teams. On taking office, President Juncker announced 'new ways of working' that were aimed to put his new model into practice.

A 'political Commission'

In framing his Presidency, Jean-Claude Juncker made frequent references to the incoming administration as a 'political Commission'. In speeches in July and October 2014, he emphasized that:

- his election marked a 'new start', where the EU would turn the page on austerity
- the Commission would concentrate on defined policy priorities
- there would be a 'special relationship' between the Commission and the Parliament due to the direct link established between the outcome of the European Parliament elections and the proposal of the President of the European Commission
- the Commission and Parliament would be 'Community players', with the European Council and member states
- but the Commission would not be the 'lackey' of either institution.
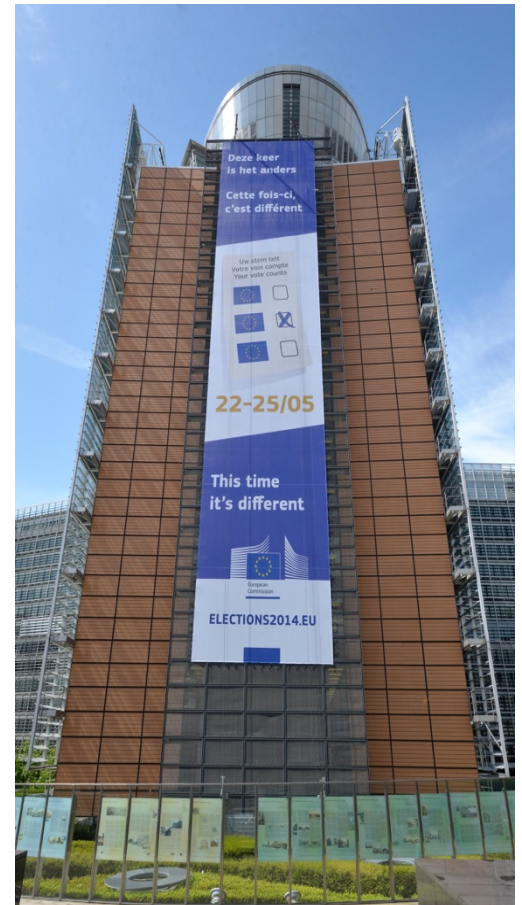
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The 'political Commission' & the 'new ways of working'

The 'political Commission' was intended to signal that the Juncker Commission would be different from its predecessors. However, the phrase provoked no little anxiety. How would the emphasis on the 'political' fit with the Commission's independence and its representation of the EU's general interest? What would be the implications for the Commission's use of its own technical expertise? Could small member states be confident that the Commission would continue to defend their interests? Could the Commission enjoy a 'special relationship' with the European Parliament and remain equidistant between the Parliament and the European Council? Would party membership and party connections assume greater significance, and if so, would the Commission's independence be undermined?
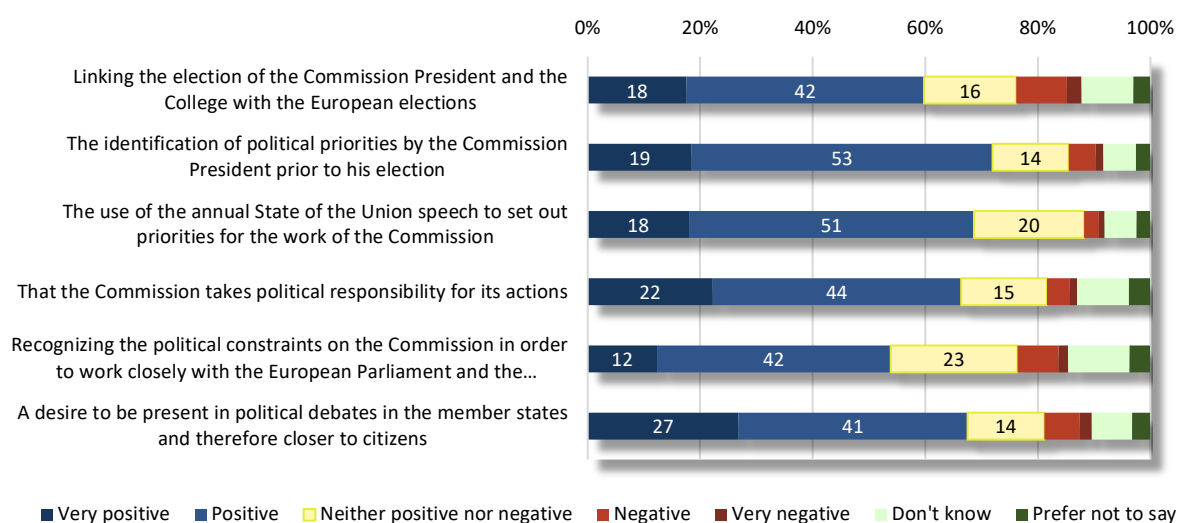
Findings on the 'political Commission'

In our study, we sought to examine what Commission staff understood by a 'political Commission' and whether they considered it a positive development. In the online survey, which was administered to all Commission staff, we outlined five propositions and asked staff which best reflected the meaning of a 'political Commission'.

Seventy-one per cent thought that 'the identification of political priorities by the Commission President prior to his election linking the election of the Commission President and the College with the European elections' best corresponded to the term.

Sixty-six per cent thought 'linking the election of the Commission President and the College with the European elections', 63 per cent 'a desire to be present in political debates in the member states and therefore closer to citizens', 57 per cent 'that the Commission takes political responsibility for its actions', and 56 per cent 'the use of the annual State of the Union speech to set out priorities for the work of the Commission'.

Figure 1. The 'political Commission: Which of the following developments have been positive (and should be retained)?

Very positive ■ Positive ■ Neither positive nor negative ■ Negative ■ Very negative ■ Don't know ■ Prefer not to say

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We then asked which elements of the 'political Commission' staff would like to retain (see Figure 1). 'The identification of political priorities by the President prior to his election' was the most popular. Seventy-two per cent agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Sixty-nine per cent picked out 'the use of the annual state of the union to set Commission priorities' and 68 per cent 'a desire to be present in political debates in the member states.

We also explored these issues in face-to-face interviews with members of cabinet – typically, the chef or deputy head of cabinet – and with Directors General.

A number made the point that the Commission had always been political. A large majority considered the 'political Commission' to be a positive development. Interviewees identified a number of particular benefits. Among those highlighted were the following:

- *It clarifies responsibility*

- *It enables the Commission to be responsive in challenging times where the organisation has to adapt*

- *It demonstrates the relevance of the EU to citizens* by challenging the perception that the Commission is a distant bureaucracy

- *The definition of an explicit policy programme provides a point of reference for delivery over the course of the mandate. It allows effective monitoring of planning and programming of policy initiation, prioritisation and flexibility, including no assumption of business continuity at the beginning of the mandate*

- *It affords greater predictability in inter-institutional relationships*

- *It enables the Commission to be responsive and to react to crises and emerging issues*

- *It ensures that all Commissioners are engaged in the political actions of the Commission*

- *It has restored the equidistance between the European Council and the European Parliament lost under the previous Commission*

- *It enables the Commission to defend the political role and prerogatives of the Commission against member states and other institutions*

- *It allowed political decisions to be taken by politicians rather than civil servants*.

However, a number of interviewees held that the 'political Commission' carries dangers in theory and in practice.

- *It potentially undermines the Commission's independence and credibility*

- *It encourages the spread and visibility of partisanship*

- *It gives the impression that less value is attached to the Commission's technical expertise*

- *Responsiveness requires shortcuts in coordination and consultation*

- *Power may be overly centralized, with the result that not all relevant expertise is consulted. There is also a danger that openness to different approaches and new ideas is limited*

- *Morale is likely to be adversely affected in areas not listed as priority*.

The 'new ways of working'

The 'political Commission' was operationalised by a set of organisational and procedural reforms. The most visible change was been the appointment of seven Vice Presidents, each assigned responsibility to deliver part of the Commission President's programme and to head

project teams. The overall aim was to bring about greater coherence in the work of the Commission by improving collaboration among Commissioners, shifting political-level coordination to the beginning of the policy process, and strengthening the College's political steer over the services.
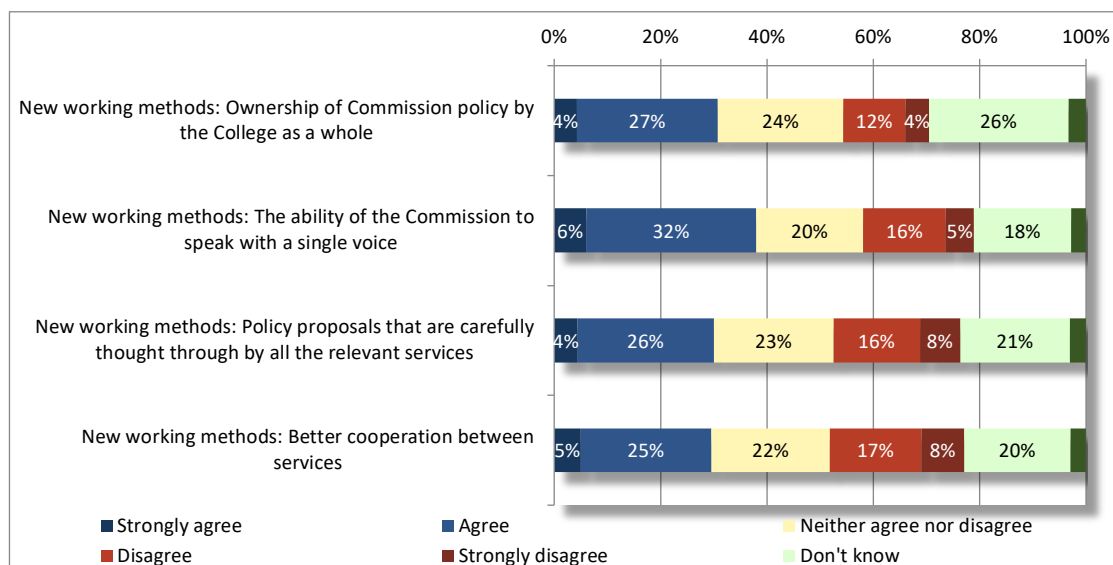
Findings on the 'new ways of working'

We were interested to discover what staff thought about the 'new ways of working' and particularly the extent to which their objectives had been realised. In the survey, we asked about the impact of 'new ways of working' along four dimensions of the Commission's operation.

- 38 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that the new working methods had improved the ability of the Commission to speak with a single voice (vs. 21 per cent who disagreed or strongly disagreed)

- 31 per cent that Commission policy was now owned by the College as a whole (vs. 21 per cent who disagreed or strongly disagreed)

- 30 per cent that policy proposals were now carefully thought through by the relevant services (vs. 24 per cent who disagreed or strongly disagreed); and

- 30 per cent that better cooperation was better between services (vs. 25 per cent who disagreed or strongly disagreed).

While a plurality of staff agreed or strongly with all four of propositions, the proportion who disagreed or disagreed strongly ranged between a fifth and a quarter of staff. In other words, staff were more likely to be favourably disposed towards the 'new ways of working' than not, but a significant minority disliked them.

A further finding was that a surprisingly large number of staff expressed a neutral view of the 'new ways of working' or did not know about its impact. This suggests that, for whatever reason, the message about the 'new ways of working', including a rationale, did not reach all parts or all levels of the Commission. Given the Commission's purported centralisation, this is a curious result.

Figure 2. In your view, to what extent have the 'new working methods', including Vice Presidents leading project teams, contributed to:

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There was also significant variation in views between Commission departments and staff in different parts of the organisation. Members of cabinet, the Secretariat General, and the European Political Strategy Centre gave the highest levels of approval. Among the departments that demonstrated the least enthusiasm was the Legal Service.

The strong opposition in parts of the Commission responsible for enforcement and implementation is perhaps unsurprising. Staff in these services have professional or cultural norms, or departmental responsibilities, that prioritise independence and technical expertise, which makes it more problematic for them to agree that the Commission should exercise discretion or take political concerns into account.

The view that emerged from the interviews was that the 'new ways of working' had affected all levels of the organisation. Members of cabinet and senior managers affirmed the primacy of the President's cabinet vis-à-vis other cabinets. Members of cabinet commented on the increased demand made of cabinets due to intensified interaction at the early stages of the policy process and the need to liaise with the cabinets of portfolio Commissioners and Vice Presidents. Directors General considered that their role had become more difficult due to their diminished input into the early political phase of decision making. Both members of cabinet and Directors General believed that the new system had made cabinet-service relations considerably more complex.

There was also broad agreement that the Secretariat General had become more powerful. Some welcomed this development, but others were more circumspect.

The following were among the benefits of the 'new ways of working' listed by interviewees:

- *Greater collegiality*
- *A stronger expectation of cross-DG cooperation*
- *Early and more effective coordination*
- *Greater awareness among different parts and services of the Commission of what other services are doing*
- *Political decisions are now decided by politicians in the College rather than by permanent civil servants*.
- *Higher quality proposals*
- *A strengthening of the College vis-à-vis the services*
- *More effective decision-making due to the system of Vice Presidents*
- *A strengthening of collective ownership of decision*

Some interviewees, however, expressed more sceptical views. Both cabinet members and Directors General identified costs or deficiencies. Among the observations made were the following:

- *The system is very hierarchical*
- *It took time for Vice Presidents and others to adjust to their roles*
- *The efficiency of the new system depends on the personalities of the Vice Presidents*
- *Vice Presidents lack sufficient administrative support*
- *The system creates tensions between Vice Presidents and Commissioners*
- *Meaningful engagement was missing from some project teams*
- *There are extra layers of hierarchy for services to negotiate, which imposes a significant bureaucratic overhead on the services*
- *There is a disconnect between interdisciplinarity at the political level and the persistence of silos among the services*

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- *Early political coordination excludes Directors General.*

A number of Interviewees liked the 'new ways of working' but thought that they could be improved. The following suggestions were outlined:

- *Regular meetings of Vice Presidents*

- *Greater care to the delineation of portfolio responsibilities and the configuration of project teams*

- *No 'one VP-one Commissioner' pairings*

- *Improving the choreography of project team meetings – their purpose, scheduling, outputs, and workflow*

- *Vice Presidents should have sufficient technical and administrative support*

- *The matrix -- or version of it – should be extended from the political level to include the services.*

Some speculated that the effectiveness of the system was strongly dependent on particular personalities and their role.

Overall rating: the Juncker Commission in question

We also asked staff to provide a general evaluation of the performance of the Juncker Commission. Respondents were only

allowed to express an opinion on Commission Presidents under which they had served.

The assessment of the Juncker Commission that emerged from the survey was extremely positive. The results are dramatic, even allowing for an element of presentism.

On all four dimensions, as shown in Figures 3a-d, the Juncker Commission scored highly in terms of the proportion of staff who agreed or strongly agreed. Moreover, far fewer respondents were also inclined to disagree or strongly disagree.

Figure 3a: How do you rate the Juncker Commission? Effectively managing the house
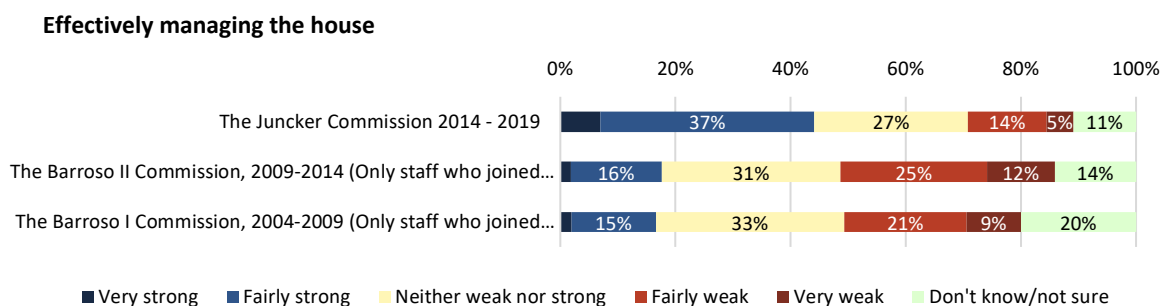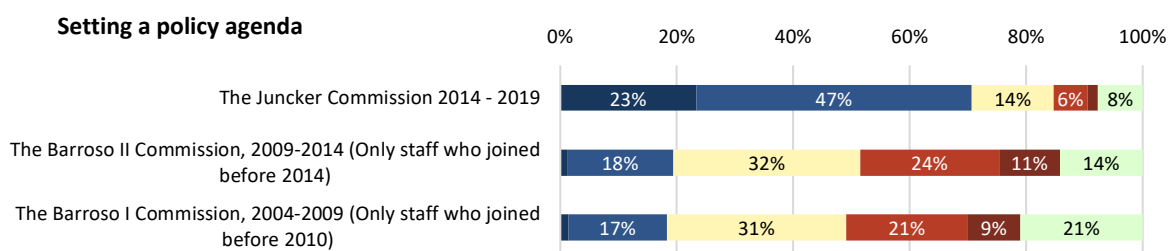
Effectively managing the house

Figure 3b: How do you rate the Juncker Commission? Setting a policy agenda

Setting a policy agenda

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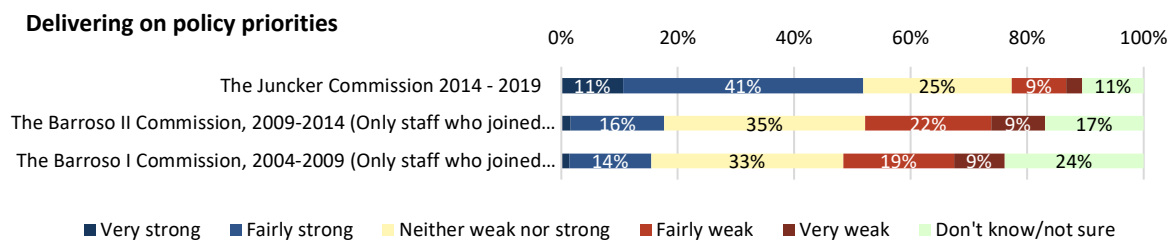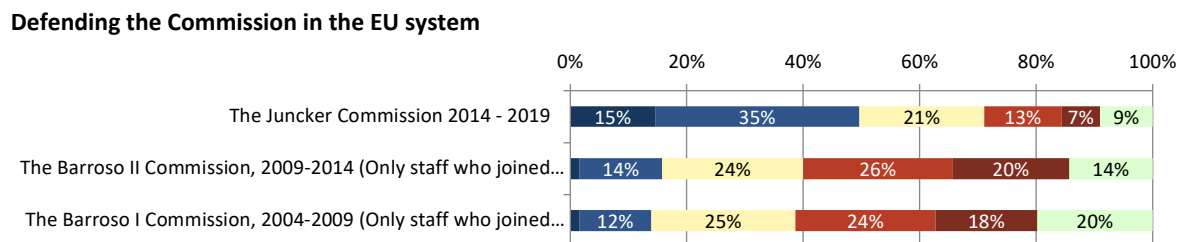*Figure 3c: How do you rate the Juncker Commission? Delivering on policy priorities*

Delivering on policy priorities

Figure 3d: How do you rate the Juncker Commission? Defending the Commission in the EU system

Defending the Commission in the EU system

Conclusion

In the eyes of Commission staff, the Juncker experiment has been a success. Respondents to the survey and interviewees were generally positive about both the 'political Commission' and the 'new ways of working'. However, they also pointed to problems – potential and actual -- and ways that the system could be improved.

Staff gave a strong endorsement to the overall performance of the Juncker Commission. A key question, however, is whether the 'political Commission' can be repeated or whether, in the absence of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process, a Commission President can define, adhere to and deliver a defined programme of policy priorities, albeit one that draws on the European Council's Strategic Agenda and takes account of the demands of the political groups in the European Parliament.

The Juncker Commission has demonstrated that policy prioritisation can be very successful, and our results show that it has strong support among Commission staff.

Hussein Kassim and Sara Connolly
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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.

Funding for the project comes from the European University Institute, the German University of Administrative Sciences Speyer, and the University of East Anglia. Although the European Commission allowed us to undertake the project and offered practical help, they provided no financial support or funding.

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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