

POLICY BRIEF
***Policy Leadership in the European Commission:
The Regulation of EU Mobile Roaming Charges***
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Political leadership in the European Commission has often been associated with the shaping of European agendas and decisions on issues of high politics. As such it is assumed to be a function of the Commission President or of the College of Commissioners. By contrast, we focus attention on a rather different form of political leadership: policy leadership. Our primary objective is to investigate the conditions for successful policy leadership in the Commission. Policy leadership is deemed to be the product of political agency and policy capacity. From this starting point, we investigate policy leadership in the Commission by looking at the mobile roaming case.

The mobile roaming case has been one of successful Commission leadership. Individual Commissioners prioritised and pushed for regulation on this issue; the policy baton was transferred effectively from Commissioner-to-Commissioner for almost a decade; it received tacit support from the Commission President; and opposition was either rebutted or accommodated.

While political agency was important in determining successful policy leadership, the latter also depended on other factors. Thus, it was both what we label as ‘policy agency’ and ‘policy capacity’ that together determined the potential of the Commission to perform successfully as a policy leader. Of particular note was mobile roaming’s relationship to wider political agendas on the single market; the character of support for and opposition to regulation on roaming; and the formal powers of the Commission to regulate in this field. Two further factors stand out, however, as having been especially important in contributing to a successful outcome in this case. These were the support of the European Parliament, including what amounted to an alliance formed between the EP and the Commission; and the policy’s appeal to ordinary citizens. Yet, as these factors were also potentially present prior to 2006, at a time of policy failure, we are drawn back to the importance of political agency, to the extent that the latter might even be considered a necessary condition for successful policy leadership.

What, then, are the wider implications of this finding? First, viewed from the perspective of the political leadership of the Commission, it demonstrates that even during a period when many commentators argue that the Commission is in decline politically, the Commission continues to have the potential to perform a policy leadership role. Policy leadership constitutes a form of political leadership which may on the surface seem to lack ambition, but which has the potential to have quite dramatic effects, particularly in terms of the performance of the EU. Second, the simple analytical distinction between political agency and policy capacity serves well as a basis for reflecting on policy leadership in specific cases, whether within the Commission or beyond it. This is because while political agency may be a necessary condition for successful policy leadership, it does not provide a sufficient explanation.

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