Process and position power: a social relational research agenda about state power in negotiations

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ABSTRACT
Relational approaches bear a distinct added value for the study of the EU and international negotiations. In this research note we advocate for the combination of social network analysis with practice theory to better capture social relational forms of state power. We introduce the concepts of position and process power to develop an analytical framework that conceptualizes negotiations as dynamic interactions between the two. We contend that negotiation outcomes rest on a country’s ability to shape subsequent network configurations based on its initial network position and its competent performance of practices. Among other things, our framework offers a nuanced understanding of the formation and role of coalition groupings as well as the forms of social relational power that can emerge among states. As we argue, states can both ‘be’ (due to exogenous and pre-existing factors) and ‘become’ powerful (thanks to the social dynamics unique to each negotiation).

Introduction
Relational approaches bear a distinct added value for the study of the EU and international negotiations, as the application of social network analysis (see e.g., Huhe et al., 2020, 2022) and practice theory (see e.g., Adler & Pouliot, 2011; Adler-Nissen & Pouliot, 2014) has shown. Albeit uniquely distinct, these approaches all focus ‘on the theoretical and analytical significance of connections, ties, transactions and other kinds of relations among entities’ (Jackson & Nexon, 2019, p. 583). The shared assumption is that relations – rather than individual agent attributes or structural constraints – explain outcomes in international negotiations. For all the contributions that relational approaches have already made to the field of EU Studies and International Relations (IR) more broadly, we contend that bridging the traditional divide...
between social network approaches and practice theory allows for a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of international negotiations, including the EU decision-making process. By introducing the concepts of position and process power and conceptualizing negotiations as the dynamic interaction between the two, we propose an analytical framework that combines social network analysis with practice theory to capture social relational forms of state power. We argue that negotiation outcomes rest on a country’s ability to shape subsequent network configurations based on their initial network position and their competent performance of practices. Among other things, our proposed framework offers a nuanced understanding of the formation and role of coalition groupings as well as the forms of social relational power that can emerge among states during negotiations.

Throughout the article, we rely on EU negotiations (specifically decision-making dynamics within the Council of the EU) to illustrate our conceptual contribution, even though the latter is applicable to any type of multilateral negotiation with intense and repeated interactions between actors. Our decision to apply our argument to EU negotiations merely depends on the fact that the EU provides a particularly promising case study, given the highly institutionalized nature, frequency, scope and depth of interaction among its member states.

After reviewing the state of the art on various forms of state power, we identify the limitations of applying social network analysis and practice theory distinctly. With the notions of position and process power, we propose a conceptual framework to capture the dynamic decision-making process and the types of social relational power countries can wield in international negotiations. We conclude by briefly discussing the methodological implications of our proposed framework.

**State of the art**

One of the most prolific – if contentious – debates in IR and European Studies concerns the nature and sources of state power as well as how countries leverage that power to gain influence in international or EU negotiations. Within this debate, several scholars taking a social relational approach have long underscored the importance of social context for the emergence of power and the wielding of influence. The following section provides a cursory overview of this debate, focusing on those contributions that, taking their cue from the social relational perspective, have applied practice or network theory to the study of international negotiations. After discussing the respective added value and shortcomings of these two approaches, we argue that combining practice and network theory can help capture hitherto underexplored forms of (state) power in EU or international negotiations.
The most significant divide in the debate over the nature of state power lies between the power-as-capability versus power-as-relation approach (Baldwin, 2013). Capability-oriented understandings of power see material and non-material resources – from military and economic capabilities to culture and ideology (Nye, 1990) – as the primary source of countries’ influence in international negotiations. Relational understandings of power, on the other hand, view states’ power as ‘situationally specific’ (Baldwin, 1989, p. 138), that is, contingent upon the social relations among actors participating in the negotiation process. Relational understandings of power have long been associated with the idea of power over someone, following Dahl’s famous proclamation that ‘A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do’ (1957, pp. 202–3). However, social relational approaches have extended their conceptions of power beyond power over other agents to include the idea of power with others (Abizadeh, 2021; see also Barnett & Duval, 2005; Jackson & Nexon, 2019; Slaughter, 2017, p. 173). More specifically, social relational definitions of power, from which we draw for our own formulation of process and position power, contend that ‘within a given structural context c, an agent v’s agential social power consists in her capacity to effect outcomes O, with the assistance of agents X, despite the resistance of agents Y’ (Abizadeh, 2021, p. 2). In other words, through their interactions with one another, states collectively shape their respective positions, which in turn define the potential courses of action available (see also Barnett & Duval, 2005, p. 42).

Social relational scholars have thus considered power in negotiations as a by-product of social relations by, among other things, examining the role of network ties as well as the performance – and social recognition – of specific practices.

**Social network analysis**

Much of the influence a country enjoys in negotiations stems from the connections it forms with other states, which determine its ability to have access to, establish connections between and distribute resources among actors within the same network (Hafner-Burton et al., 2009). Among the most important resources countries can circulate through network ties is information: given the uncertainty that surrounds negotiations, the role of network ties in facilitating the flow of information – be it about other actors’ preferences, intelligence or technical knowledge – is of paramount importance (Keohane, 1984). EU Studies have firmly recognized that member states treat networks as opportunity structures to share information and shape other countries’ preferences (e.g., Csehi & Puetter, 2021; Vantaggiato et al., 2021). Scholars have increasingly applied network analysis to better understand coalition-
formation dynamics in the Council of the EU (Huhe et al., 2018, 2022) and explore the reconfiguration of Council’s cooperation patterns following Brexit (Huhe et al., 2020). Network theory has also proved valuable in explaining member states’ bargaining success in EU negotiations. In seeking to account for the importance of cooperation ties for member states’ influence over decision-making, Daniel Naurin and colleagues formulated the concept of network capital, defined as the ‘set of potential co-operation partners that an actor has access to for gaining and spreading information and building coalitions during the negotiation process’ (see also Arregui & Thomson, 2009; Häge & Naurin, 2013, p. 960; Naurin & Lindahl, 2010; Perarnaud & Arregui, 2022). The concept of network capital encompasses both the notion of ‘power with’ and ‘power over’ discussed above: national representatives within the Council of Ministers rely on network ties to access and circulate information and build constructive coalitions with other member states, shaping the negotiation process together with other like-minded countries.

While we know that networks are a mode of organization that facilitates coordination and allows countries to share resources and influence preferences, it remains unclear how network ties are leveraged in practice: how do states share information across the network in such a way that it secures their influence? How do they decide to rely on different bargaining strategies depending on their position in Council networks? Which opportunities are available to member states depending on their particular network position? We argue that practice theory offers the answers needed to unveil these dynamics.

**Practice theory**

Practice theory suggests that we should approach world politics, including international bargaining, through its manifold practices. Adler and Pouliot (2011) define practice as a competent and patterned performance that encapsulates background knowledge and is expressed by discourse and behaviour. Practice rests on language, communication and discourse as well as material artefacts.

Member states’ interactions at the EU level lend themselves particularly well to practice theory because Council negotiations can be conceptualized as the sum of competent performances. Council negotiations are patterned, in that they occur regularly and with great frequency. Further, national representatives negotiate by displaying their competence, and their negotiation performance rests on background knowledge, which manifests itself as expertise, know-how and bargaining skills (Bailer, 2011; Panke, 2012). Finally, these negotiations are both ideational and material. That is, they take place through constant exchanges in working group meetings, bilateral
discussions, informal groupings, while also requiring material support and equipment (Adler-Nissen & Pouliot, 2014).

According to practice theory, for a member state to be an influential actor in the negotiation, it first needs to be acknowledged by others as competent in the context of a specific practice. Competence over a certain policy area can be accumulated in different ways: a state’s reputation (including whether it is recognized by others to have played an influential role in a similar policy debate before), whether it has visible stakes in the negotiations or the country’s ability to proactively lobby important actors in the agenda-setting stage (including promoting a certain issue-framing). Those competence claims must be recognized by the state’s counterparts. In turn, socially recognized competence leads a country to exert influence over the negotiation process (Adler-Nissen & Pouliot, 2014).

**Shortcomings in the existing literature**

For all the significant contributions that social network analysis and practice theory bring to IR and European Studies alike, there are unexplored dynamics that, in our view, can only be examined by combining the two approaches and by recognizing their joint grounding in social relational theory. Both network as well as practice theory assume that states do not only have but gain power through their interaction with – and social recognition by – others. Power is thus relative, not absolute. And power positions are dynamic, not static. Elaborating on these shared assumptions, we provide a framework that captures the influence countries gain by means of both their exogenous power resources, which pre-exist social interaction, as well as the position and process power that emerge by virtue of their intentional interactions with one another.

Most studies employing network analysis do not consider networks as shifting over the course of a single negotiation, nor do they examine the importance of practices as drivers of those network reconfigurations. Moreover, the concept of network capital adopted in studies of the EU only takes into account the number of ties that member states have at the onset of the negotiation process, without asking how, within the specific social context of a particular negotiation, those ties change and/or are exploited to shape the final policy outcome. As for practice theory, studies to date provide a limited categorization of all the different types of practices member states rely on, without engaging with the rich negotiation theory literature on bargaining strategies, and they seem to ignore the importance of a state’s position and role within a network for its ability to claim competence in the performance of negotiation practices. Situating practices within the wider web of network ties making up the negotiation process will help address some of these shortcomings.
Towards a research agenda on negotiations as dynamic interactions between process and position power

Moving away from purely capability-oriented conceptions of states’ power, we combine the insights of network and practice theory to explain how network ties and practices alike enable member states to gain – and not only have – power in EU negotiations. We do so by developing two types of social relational power, position and practice power, and by exploring how a country’s network position and the competent performance of practices operate according to a mutually reinforcing dynamic that affects member states’ influence over the decision-making process. We define position power as the influence gained through the recognized position of an actor in the negotiation network, which provides that same actor with the ability at time t to influence the network configuration at time t+1. Given that any type of position in a network depends on the number and type of relations (ties) that a state shares with others, a state’s position power, by definition, hinges on its position relative to its network counterparts. When referring to a member state’s position in the network, we mean the country’s placement and role within the network. In turn, process power is understood as the influence gained by an actor’s competent performance of shared, established, practices recognized as such by the other members of that same network. Following the performance and recognition of particular practices, a country might be able to alter or solidify its position and function within the cooperation network.

As discussed in the review of the literature, our notions of position and process power owe much to existing social relational approaches to power. For one, relational power is not an attribute that states possess inherently, but it is socially situated. That is, it emerges out of the situationally specific interactions with the other members of the network (Adler-Nissen & Pouliot, 2014, p. 893). As a result, a particular state’s position or practice might be perceived differently depending on the social setting or the specific moment in time. Take the example of a chair offering a face-saving compromise to a member state in a minority position during the closing phase of a negotiation in the Council. This initiative might be recognized – and praised – as a competent performance by the chair, in line with its bridging role and position within the network. If that same chair were to offer a similar compromise to the same country during the opening phases of the negotiations, however, that same performance would likely be perceived differently by the other member states – and the chair’s position and influence within the network might suffer as a result. Moreover, much like the notion of structural power proposed by Guzzini (1993), our conceptualization of position and process power is predicated on the social recognition from other actors. That is, a state cannot become powerful without its
position or bargaining practices being recognized as legitimate or at least competent by the other actors within the same network.

However, we also offer distinct innovations. For one, much of the literature still follows Dahl’s traditional approach to power, whereby states’ influence depends on their ability to leverage intrinsic power resources to change outcomes or affect the behaviour of others (Guzzini, 1993, pp. 451–6). Instead, we focus primarily on relations as both the source and conduit of state power, considering relations among states – and the (re)configuration of those relations – to explain the outcome of international negotiations.

Most importantly, we add to existing social relational approaches by proposing a framework of analysis that looks at the dynamic interaction between a state’s position and process power. Networks provide the organized social context within which specific negotiation practices take place and different network positions present states with distinct opportunities to influence the negotiations in terms of content and process. In turn, the competent performance of a negotiation practice might allow a state to either solidify or change its position within a network, by attempting to increase or strengthen the number of ties it shares with other nodes in the network. Importantly, states’ position and process power do not emerge in a vacuum, but they depend on both pre-existing cooperation ties and a set of structural factors that help determine where each state stands in relation to others at the beginning of the negotiation process. Multilateral negotiations, and particularly so EU negotiations, are recurrent, frequent and subject to a distant shadow of the future. As a result, the experience and knowledge gained in previous negotiations influences the preparation of positions prior to the formal start of the negotiations. So do bilateral ties that member states nurture next to their multilateral engagement at the EU level. Other than the pre-existing bi- or mini-lateral relations among states, structural factors also help determine where countries position themselves in relation to one another at the onset of the negotiation. These factors include institutional rules (e.g., voting rules or, in the case of the EU, whether a country is holding the Rotating Presidency), issue-specific characteristics (e.g., issue salience for the country in question) and, indeed, power resources (the size of the national administration and diplomatic network, for instance).

Our conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1. Pre-existing cooperation ties and structural factors (step A) determine how member state \( x \) will position itself at the very start of the negotiations (step B). From there, the dynamic reconfiguration of the network depends on what member state \( x \) makes of its network position (step C). Holding a central/influential position in the network at time \( t \) is likely to increase a member state’s chances of being recognized as competent, of being acknowledged as a skilful counterpart and of exercising influence over the decision-making process at time \( t+1 \) (step D). This is because a central network position
affords privileged access to information, to particular social spaces (e.g., subgroups of like-minded countries) and signals credibility to the other member states. As a result, the type of practices member state x will engage in at time t will depend on its initial network position and, therefore, on its ability to access the resources that that network position affords. For instance, if a country is holding the rotating Presidency and therefore enjoys a particularly central role in the network, it might be possible for the country’s delegates to act as neutral mediators. Alternatively, if a country wants to propose an alternative solution, it might seek to form new ties in an attempt to create a critical mass that would support the counterproposal. As a direct consequence of member state x having changed (or strengthened) its position within the network, the overall configuration of the network changes. For instance, following its skilful performance of specific bargaining practices, member state x might have formed a reciprocal tie with member states y and z that did not exist at time t. In short, member state’s x practices at time t, which are predicated on its network position at the onset of the negotiations, help change the network’s configuration at time t+1. This iterative process – steps B to D – then repeats itself throughout the negotiations until the end of the formal decision-making process (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Visualization of the dynamic position-process power feedback mechanism.

The proposed framework introduces three key innovations to the study of networks and practices in the context of negotiations, as well as to conceptions of states’ power. First, in exploring the dynamic and mutually reinforcing relationship between states’ network positions and negotiation practices, we show that member states yield influence not only from prior cooperation ties and structural factors, but also from the specific social context within which EU negotiations take place. Only appreciating that
states can both ‘be’ (due to exogenous and pre-existing factors) and ‘become’ powerful (thanks to the social dynamics unique to each negotiation), can we fully capture the power that states come to exercise in international and EU negotiations.

Secondly, our framework understands the negotiation process as a dynamic and iterative process of network re-configurations. All the while acknowledging and investigating over-time variation in the network structure, most of the contributions that have applied network analysis to the study of EU negotiations map the status quo and do not consider the possibility that the network structure changes over the course of a single negotiation. Our framework aims to highlight the potential that a more extensive application of network theory can bring to our understanding of power in the EU.

Lastly, our proposed framework makes a first step towards bridging the gap between the negotiation and practice theory literatures by advocating for a more fine-grained categorization of negotiation practices. Indeed, it might be beneficial to draw from studies on bargaining strategies to better understand how and under what conditions exactly a state is recognized as competent. Specifically, what type of position in the network might prompt a state to engage in hard rather than soft (Dür & Mateo, 2010), more or less generous (Naurin, 2015) or more or less cooperative (Panke, 2012) strategies? And how can we expect the competent performance of these strategies to shape future network configurations?

In short, tapping into the potential of social relational theory and building a framework that combines network and practice theory allows to answer a set of questions that have thus far received little attention in EU studies: how do states rely on their network positions to shape the outcome of negotiations? That is, how does one convert one’s central position in a network at time t into influence over other member states’ positions (the network configuration at time t+1)? How does the competent performance of specific bargaining practices (e.g., acting as an honest broker, being seen as acknowledging other member states’ constraints, being proactively constructive in the negotiation) allow one to influence other member states’ positions and ultimately (re-)shape the network configuration? Which type of network position might prompt a member state to engage in a particular practice over another?

This conceptual research agenda lays the groundwork for empirical applications investigating the dynamic interaction between process and position power. Notably, our relational concepts offer explanatory power also in cases where a state did not manage to successfully shape the negotiation process. For instance, a lack of process power would suggest that the displayed practice was not considered competent (enough) by the (majority of) negotiating parties within the network, or that the state’s position in the network was too marginal and did not provide sufficient clout. Vice versa, the lack of process power might suggest that the country did not have enough experience or
knowledge of shared institutional norms to engage in bargaining practices successfully.

**Methodological considerations**

The successful application of the proposed framework rests on methodological approaches that can capture the interaction between process and position power. In this regard, particular attention will need to be devoted to data collection – and related challenges – as well as to the operationalization of core concepts.

Our proposed approach relies on fine-grained data collection that carefully traces network reconfigurations and the repeated use of practices within the course of a single negotiation. Anyone familiar with data gathering when it comes to EU or international negotiations will know that this type of investigation is generally confronted with considerable access issues. However, there are virtuous examples that can offer guidance for future research, such as the NCEU dataset collected by Naurin and colleagues (2019) through several rounds of phone interviews, which offers rich social network data on the Council. Similar survey projects would be the ideal starting point not only to collect network data, but also to explore the performance of specific practices by diplomats and EU officials. Depending on the available resources, ethnographic work, participant observation or elite interviews – the traditional data collection methods in the practice theory literature – could then complement surveys to offer an even fuller picture of the social dynamics on which both process and position power are predicated.

In terms of operationalization, careful consideration should be devoted to the conceptualization and measurement of core concepts, such as what constitutes a node (a member state? An individual negotiator?), what makes up a tie between two nodes (formal cooperation? Any type of informal interaction among negotiators?), where to draw the boundaries of a network (is it comprised of the 27 member states in the Council? Does it extent to other EU institutions?) and how best to define different types of node centrality attributes (for useful examples of the latter see e.g., Hafner-Burton et al., 2009; Hafner-Burton & Montgomery, 2010; Huhe et al., 2020; Naurin & Lindahl, 2010). Similarly, when it comes to practices, a more detailed categorization of the different types of bargaining strategies and tactics that member states rely on – and here the negotiation theory literature offers considerable insights – would result in a richer analysis of the various forms that process power can take.

**Conclusion**

Social relational approaches bear great potential for the study of states’ power in international negotiations. By formulating the concepts of process
and position power and examining their interaction in the context of EU negotiations, this research agenda proposes a novel combination of practice theory and social network analysis. This new approach allows to appreciate new forms of emergent state power: that is, power that countries derive from the social dynamic unique to each negotiation. With this conceptual framework, we seek to provide novel tools to answer old and new questions alike: how can a member state – through its competent performance of negotiation practices – enhance its position within Council networks? What does a central network position mean in practice and how does that impact on a member state’s ability to influence negotiations?

All the while relying on the EU – and specifically the Council of the EU – as an illustrative case study, the present research agenda seeks to show the potentialities of relational approaches for the study of EU and international negotiations alike. Regardless of the decision-making forum, a focus on relations, rather than solely on actors’ attributes or structural constraints, can provide richer accounts of international negotiations. Actors’ positions are co-constitutive and negotiations outcomes depend on situationally specific practices (process power) and the reconfiguration of ties among actors (position power).

**Note**

1. For an excellent review of social relational theories, their shared assumptions and differences, see Jackson and Nexon (2019).

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