

# ***A Thousand Flowers Blooming? Methodological Practices in European Union Studies***

by Joseph Jupille

The institutional and political complexity of the European Union (EU) elevates the importance of shared standards and methods of inquiry, while arguably making them more difficult to achieve. Recent surveys of EU Studies have done much to illuminate the substantive, geographic, disciplinary and theoretical contours of the field, which has evolved markedly from “boutique” to “boom” in its half-century history (Keeler 2005; see also Pollack 2005). This essay addresses itself to the narrower question of methodological practices (see also Nyikos and Pollack 2003). On the basis of a content analysis of mainstream English-language political science journals publishing on the EU, the essay demonstrates that the methodological diversity of the field is increasing. Against a backdrop of qualitative dominance of the field, the entrenchment and expansion of statistical and formal methods bespeak a methodological pluralism which, whatever its inherent attractions, bodes well for the growth of knowledge about the European Union.

## **Definitions and Operationalizations**

Methodology can be defined as “a set of interlocking rules, principles, or a story, that describes and prescribes the ... the means of observational exploration ... in a scientific discipline” (Overton 1998). In assessing methodological practices in EU Studies, and following other recent surveys (Bennett *et al.* 2003; Pion-Berlin and Cleary 2005), I adopt three commonly used methodological categories. *Qualitative* methodology describes work that relies on verbal (as opposed to symbolic or mathematical) presentation and primarily (though not exclusively) on non-numerical data, with numerical data used descriptively rather than inferentially. *Statistical* methodology differs from qualitative primarily in the greater emphasis on numbers and on the different uses to which they are put. I consider as statistical all work involving use of quantita-

tive data for inference, i.e., for generalization from samples to populations. *Formal* methodology involves the use of symbolic logic or, in practice, mathematical models. The key criterion is not deductive logical structure, but rather the language (symbolic/mathematical as opposed to verbal) in which arguments are presented.

Operationalizations flow from these definitions. Work will be categorized as “qualitative” when it relies on verbal (as opposed to symbolic) argumentation and when evidence takes primarily verbal form. Work that includes quantitative (numerical) evidence will be classified as “qualitative” so long as quantities are used primarily descriptively rather than inferentially. Thus, I code as qualitative all of those articles that include neither formal models nor inferential statistics. Use of inferential statistics (roughly, anything reporting significance levels) triggers categorization as “quantitative,” even if the bulk of the evidence takes verbal form. Similarly, use of symbolic logic/mathematical models, including economic tools such as production functions and partial equilibrium models, will trigger categorization as “formal,” regardless of other methodological content. This is a highly imperfect but workable coding scheme (see Jupille 2005 for fuller discussion).

In determining whether the content of a given article brings it within the ambit of EU Studies, I first inspected article titles, turning to abstracts and main bodies if there were questions. I also included general articles on regional integration theory in the “EU Studies” category, though not those that preponderantly examined integration schemes in other parts of the world. A handful of borderline cases arose, but they did so infrequently and randomly enough that I do not suspect systematic bias.

With all of this said, a few words about the actual data. I rely on articles published in journals with substantial EU content. Three obvious inclusions are the main EU Studies journals for political scientists: *Journal of*

**Table 1. Journals Surveyed**

<u>Journal</u>	<u>Acronym</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Years</u>	<u>N</u> <u>articles</u>	<u>N EU</u> <u>articles</u>	<u>EU</u> <u>content</u>
European Journal of International Relations	EJIR	Europe	1995-2003	148	22	14.9%
European Union Politics	EUP	Europe	2000-2003	70	53	75.7%
International Organization	IO	US	1947-2003	1398	102	7.3%
Journal of Common Market Studies <sup>b</sup>	JCMS	Europe	1962-2003	880	752	85.5%
Journal of European Public Policy	JEPP	Europe	1994-2003	357	302	84.6%
<b>Totals<sup>c</sup></b>				<b>2853</b>	<b>1231</b>	<b>43.1%</b>

Notes: <sup>a</sup>missing v.57 n.3 ; IO activities excluded; <sup>b</sup>missing v.20 n.4 ; annuals excluded; <sup>c</sup>8 of 1231 not coded for methods

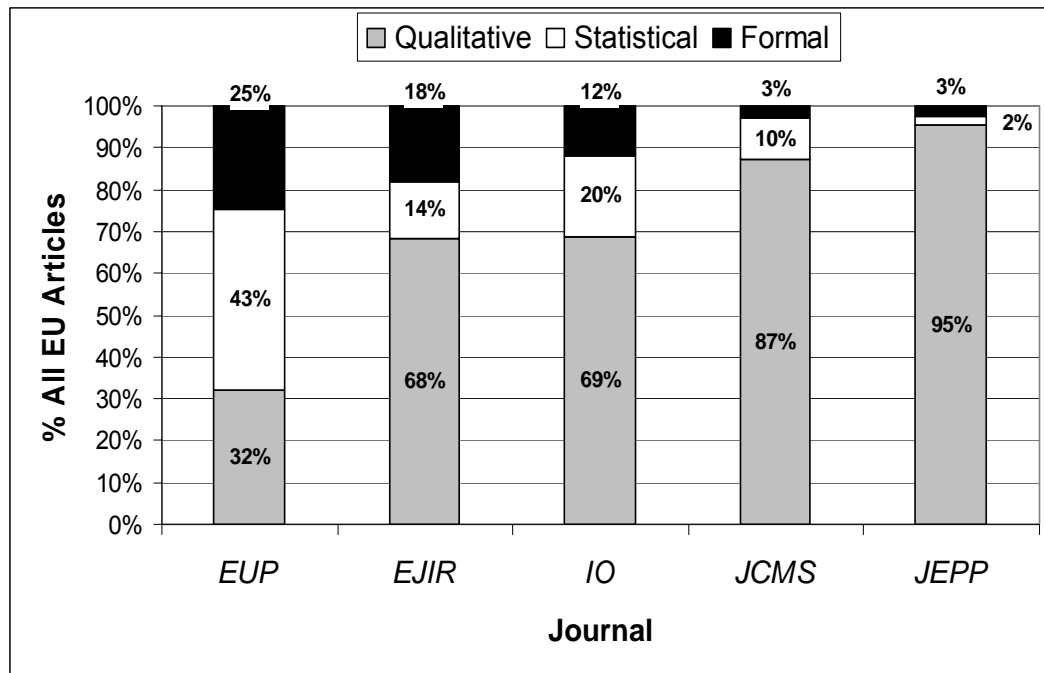
*Common Market Studies*, *Journal of European Public Policy* and *European Union Politics*. The other obvious choice was *International Organization*, since it has a long history of publishing EU-relevant articles and since I thought it important, given some of my descriptive aims, to include a US-based journal. The final journal, chosen because it represents something like the European analogue to *IO* (as an IR rather than EU journal) is *European Journal of International Relations*. Table 1 summarizes each source.

**Patterns of Methodological Practices in EU Studies**

Each of the three coded methods (see

Figure 1 below) has found longstanding (if sometimes uneven) application in EU Studies. Qualitative methods dominate this sample, characterizing 85% of all articles surveyed versus 10% for statistical methods and 5% for formal. While I have not carefully scrutinized specific tools used (e.g., discourse analysis, ordinary least squares regression, or spatial models), it seems clear that a wide range have been used in all three methodologies. Each method demonstrates wide applicability across theoretical, substantive, and other concerns. Given space constraints, I cannot even begin to attempt a survey, even of the less widely used statistical and formal methods. Suffice it to say that just about every aspect of

**Figure 1. Methodological Content of EU Journals**



the EU that one might imagine has probably been approached using all three of the methodologies listed above. To focus the analysis, let me concentrate on two distinctive cuts at methodological practice in the EU, looking at distributions (1) across the main journals (and the parts of the world in which they are published) and (2) over-time.

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of different methodologies within EU work published in the five journals surveyed. A number of sometimes surprising observations suggest themselves. First, unsurprisingly, qualitative methodologies dominate overall and characterize sizeable majorities of the work published in all but *EUP*. Second, though, a surprising picture of methodological pluralism emerges from this distribution. If by “pluralism” one intends “balance,” *EUP* comes out as the most pluralistic of the sampled journals, with roughly similar proportions of work done using qualitative, statistical, and formal methods. (It should be noted that most of the qualitative work appears in the journal’s “forum section” rather than in standalone articles.) At the other extreme, *JEPP* has been almost monomethodological, with fully 95% of its articles employing qualitative methods, though my sense in surveying the journal is that this tendency has softened somewhat in the last few years. Third, perhaps the most surprising result for me was the relatively high frequency of formal models in *EJIR*, sometimes viewed as a bastion of post-positivist epistemology. Fourth, while not illustrated in the figure or elsewhere, my impression is that methodological content varies over time within many of the specific journals, possibly as a function of editorial priorities. Future work testing this conjecture might prove interesting. Fifth, and possibly unsurprisingly, correlating the proportions of each journal devoted to each of the three methods reveals strong negative and statistically significant relationships between both qualitative and statistical ( $R=-.983$ ,  $p=.003$ ) and qualitative and formal ( $R=-.934$ ,  $p=.02$ ) methods, but not between statistical and formal methods ( $R=.855$ ,  $p=.065$ ). Of course this may have to do with the preponderance of qualitative methods and

the status of the other two approaches as residual categories. But it may also reflect a certain degree of methodological specialization within EU Studies journals, illustrated most clearly by the apparent differences between, say, *EUP* and *JEPP*.

Thinking about distribution across journals also affords us an opportunity to consider possible transatlantic scholarly differences (see e.g., Verdun 2003). With this goal, and mindful of the imbalance in the number of articles that it produces and a variety of possible inferential pitfalls, I compared the methodological content of the one US-based journal in the sample, *IO*, with the other four (European) journals. Table 2 reports this comparison.

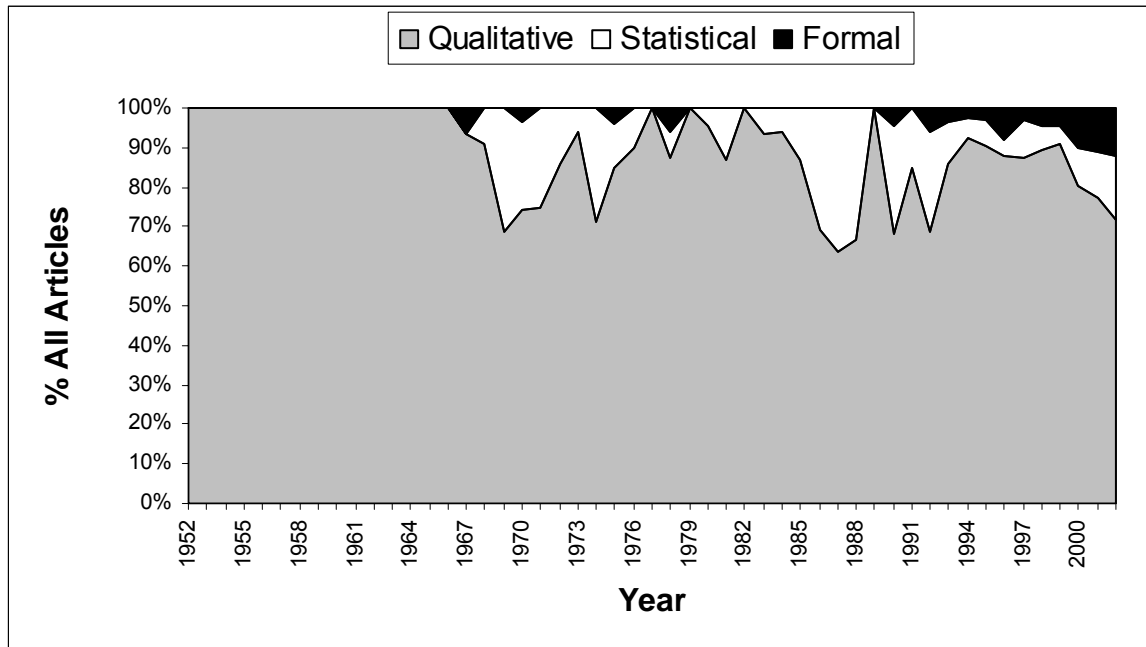
**Table 2. EU Studies Methodology in US and European Journals**

	US	European
Qualitative	69% (70)	86% (975)
Statistical	20% (20)	10% (108)
Formal	12% (12)	4% (46)

There are at least two ways of interpreting these figures. On one reading, US and European journals do indeed publish different kinds of work: *IO* publishes twice as many statistical articles as its European counterparts, in terms of the proportion of all work appearing in its pages, and three times more formal articles. On a second reading, quite contrary, what stands out is just how similar these profiles are, with the preponderance of work in EU Studies employing qualitative methods regardless of the side of the Atlantic on which it is published. Indeed, knowing whether an article appeared in US-based *IO* or one of the European journals would not help us better to predict what methodology it uses, since our best guess would be “qualitative” in either case (Goodman and Kruskal’s  $\lambda = 0$ ).

Let us turn, finally, to the larger historical picture. How have the methodological practices of EU Studies changed over the five-plus decades of the field’s existence? Figure 2 on the following page illustrates these trends.

**Figure 2. Methodological Trends in EU Studies, 1952-2002**



A few points from this “big picture” perspective suggest themselves. First, until the mid-1960s EU Studies exclusively employed qualitative methods. Whether the change has to do with the rise of behavioral approaches to political science, the emergence of *JCMS* (which published a certain number of econometric and formal articles from very early on), or a combination of the two, the methodological uniformity of these early years is striking. Second, and somewhat ironically, substantial inflections of statistical methods characterized both the initial serious troubles with the Community and integration theory (late 1960s-early 1970s) and the relaunch of both from about the mid-1980s into the first part of the 1990s. Third, the relative preponderance of qualitative methods during the period from ca. 1973 to ca. 1985 may go some way toward explaining why American observers, perhaps unimpressed with the “scientific” merits of qualitative methods, have viewed this period as dark times for EU Studies. Fourth, it is worth noting that, while formal methods long represented occasional economist-driven blips on the EU Studies radar, trends over the last decade-and-a-half seem to suggest that that methodology is here to stay. Finally, cor-

relating methodological content across time gives additional insight into the relationships among alternative approaches. Statistical and formal work give even less hint of a relationship from this perspective ( $R=.117$ ,  $p=.412$ ), and while statistical and qualitative methods maintain a strong negative relationship ( $R=-.961$ ,  $p<.000$ ), the rivalry between qualitative and formal methods, while still significant, seems rather less acute ( $R=-.389$ ,  $p=.005$ ).

### Summary and Implications

Briefly summarizing the foregoing, EU Studies, as represented in this sample of journals, seems to provide a broad methodological tent. True, qualitative methods are preponderant. But the rise of new journals has seemingly created a situation wherein some methodological specialization is taking place around a core component of journals that might be characterized as “qualitative plus.” Concretely, qualitative work is substantially less likely to appear in *EUP* than in the other journals, statistical and formal work substantially more so; *JEPP* is far closer to the average in these respects, but also stands out as a bastion of qualitative methodology.

The extent to which any of these things

– qualitative dominance, seeming entrenchment and expansion of non-qualitative approaches, and some apparent methodological rivalry – are considered desirable depends on an assessment of how knowledge is best produced. The facile answer, probably the best that can be offered here, is that the relationship between scholarly consensus (methodological or otherwise) and knowledge production is parabolic: the unhealthy extremes of Babel (too little consensus) and groupthink (too much consensus) both stifle understanding. A middle range is characterized instead by mutual intelligibility of different methodological approaches and by the critical spirit that would seem best to advance the enterprise. In the end we require both certain shared foundations, vocabularies and standards of assessment, à la Kuhnian normal scientists, and the ability to think critically along Popperian lines. Whether the thousand methodological flowers currently blooming in EU Studies represents such an optimum remains an open question.

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