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Political leadership in the European Union: an introduction

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ABSTRACT

In light of recent crises in the European Union (EU) there is a need for more systematic analysis of political leadership in the EU, which is what we seek to do in this collection. This introduction offers a theoretical and conceptual background for the volume. Drawing on Burns, Blondel, Elgie, Young, and others, this contribution identifies how political leadership can be analysed in various institutions and institutional settings of the EU. The questions we ask are: what kind of leadership is there in different domains; how and with what tools does political leadership occur and operate in various case studies and how effective have those been? Although difficult to synthesise the results into one overarching leadership concept, or indeed locus, we argue that the individual studies demonstrate that the EU is by no means leaderless.

KEYWORDS

Crisis; EU; institutions; leaders; political leadership

Introduction

Political leadership in the European Union (EU) is an issue that has attracted less scholarly attention than many other aspects of European politics and governance. This lack of attention stands in sharp contrast to, on the one hand, the extensive research and literature on political leadership in regard to national political systems, and, on the other hand, the obvious need to reflect on and analyse systematically the nature of political leadership in the EU.

The EU, in fact, lacks a clear leadership structure, due to the fragmented character of the European polity. Many leaders and would-be leaders dominate the European scene. Particularly in situations of crisis where swift action is required, the system of fragmented and partly shared leadership hardly works: decisions are taken too late or not at all; if decisions are taken, it is only after lengthy deliberations and negotiations among a host of interested parties and institutions. In the end, it is hard to trace who bears responsibility for them. In many cases, there is also a lack of leadership in the implementation stage of European decisions. In short, the political system of the EU often seems unable or slow to respond to pressing matters. When it must act, it is typically characterised by both a lack of strong and clear political leadership and, at the same time, the abundance of leaders, with none of them clearly in the driving seat.

This specific situation is almost the polar opposite to the exercise of political leadership at the national level. There, highly exposed individuals endowed with authority, such as

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heads of state or government, chairs of political parties, or other outstanding personalities, fulfil leadership functions in a multitude of ways. Accordingly, there exists a vast literature on political leadership in national contexts, including elaborated theoretical approaches on how to explain the respective phenomena. However, these explanatory approaches as well as the corresponding research findings cannot simply be applied to the analysis of leadership in the EU. Of course, there is also reflection and theorizing about political leadership in international contexts, mostly referring to leaders in intergovernmental bargains. Yet the Union is much more than just an international organisation, so that these theories also do not easily fit. These difficulties may explain why there is so little research into political leadership in the EU.

Against this background, this collection aims at highlighting various aspects of exercising political leadership in the EU through both thorough empirical analyses and theoretical reflections. In this introduction, we first briefly refer to basic theories on political leadership in national and international contexts. Then we present an overview of what has been done so far in theorizing and analysing political leadership in the EU. Furthermore, we summarise the issues and themes, as well as the theoretical approaches, raised in the contributions of this volume and discuss, whether and, if so, in what way these contributions and their findings constitute progress in leadership research. Finally, we formulate a few questions aimed at focusing on possible common denominators or complementarities between our findings and at pointing to the way forward for further research.

Political leadership in national and international contexts

Concepts of 'leadership' in national political systems have been widely developed in a range of academic disciplines and numerous aspects of the phenomenon have been considered. In the disciplines of political science and public administration, the groundwork for theorizing leadership was laid by Burns (1978). For him, a leader is an individual who acts in line with followers and their values and motivations. Burns sees leadership as a relationship that enables leaders and followers to take part in a common enterprise. Without the connection to a common goal, there cannot be leadership. Furthermore, Burns differentiates between 'transactional' and 'transforming' leadership. The former takes place when 'one person takes the initiative in making contact with others for the purpose of an exchange of valued things'. The latter is the case when 'one or more persons engage with each other in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality' (Burns 1978, 83).

Turning specifically to the study of *political* leadership, Blondel (1987) seeks to create a universal model of such leadership applicable to all polities. His study focuses on how leadership is an exercise in coercive power. The institutional setting and the personality of the office holder are of importance for successful leadership (see also Blondel 2008). Robert Elgie (1995) looks at the power and motivation of political leaders. He sees political leadership as

... the process by which governments try to exercise control ... the extent to which heads of state and heads of government, that is, the individuals who occupy the most prominent positions of authority in the state structure, are able to determine the outcome of the decision-making process. (Elgie 1995, 4)

His comparative analysis of political leadership (presidents and/or prime ministers) in leading countries in the world focuses on institutional settings as main explanatory factors for

variations in exercising leadership. He thus provides insights into 'a process of interaction between leaders and the leadership environment with which they are faced' (Elgie 1995, 191).

Political leadership is also widely theorized in international contexts. Here the most prominent question is why and how individuals perform as leaders in international bargains, in order to solve collective action problems. Young (1991) for example distinguishes between three types of political leadership in these bargains, which usually work under unanimity rule: structural leadership, entrepreneurial leadership and intellectual leadership. Whereas the first is mostly based on structural power of the leader, for example the power position of his state of origin, an entrepreneurial leader makes use of specific negotiation skills and thus influences the outcome of a bargain. The intellectual leader by contrast 'relies on the power of ideas to shape the way in which participants in institutional bargaining understand the issue at stake ...' (Young 1991, 288).

In applying these approaches to political leadership in the EU, the approach of Burns appears particularly fruitful for its emphasis on the leader-follower-relationship and also for the distinction between transactional and transforming leadership. The work of Blondel is significant as he points to the concept of power linked to political leadership. Elgie's approach is likewise important as he draws attention to the institutional context of a leader. Finally Young's concept of leadership in international contexts is particularly suited for analysing those dimensions of the EU where intergovernmental bargains dominate.

The EU lacks many features of a consolidated polity and strong institutional resources, but it is neither merely an international organisation. Yet it is characterised by a dense web of institutions and informal network structures, as well as various arenas for intergovernmental bargaining, which might in various ways foster or hamper the exercise of political leadership.

Research on political leadership in the EU: the state of the art

How have scholars of the EU conceptualised political leadership so far? Research on political leadership in the EU generally focuses on individual institutions and their leaders: the European Commission and its presidents, the presidencies of the Council and the European Council, individual heads of state or government as well as groups of national leaders, such as the Franco-German tandem.

The most extensively researched leaders are the presidents of the European Commission. Particularly Jacques Delors has attracted much scholarly attention. Ross (1995) and Drake (2000) have delivered a dense description of his successes and failures. Endo (1999) has analysed Delors with an elaborated theoretical framework differentiating between opportunities and constraints in his institutional resources, situational context and personal capacities. Other Commission presidents are hardly researched as individual leaders, but figure mostly in the framework of comparative studies that made use of various approaches. Cini (2008) provided a dense description of the Santer and Prodi Commissions during the ten-year period of their reign (see also Lord 2002). Boucher (2006) elaborated a quantitative analysis of the leadership qualities of all Commission presidents since the founding of the Communities. Tömmel (2013) using Burns' concept of transactional or transforming leadership has assessed three presidents to find that Delors was more of a transforming leader compared to Santer and Prodi who performed merely as transactional leaders. Most studies

reveal that there are vast differences in leadership performance of the Commission presidents; that these differences reflect institutional constraints of the office, differing situational contexts and, above all, variations in personal capacities of the office holders. The theoretical underpinnings of these studies mainly draw on leadership approaches that were first developed for national leaders and then adapted to the context of the EU.

Another set of leaders that has been studied considerably are the presidents of the Council and the European Council. In these studies, which until recently referred to the system of rotating presidencies (Tallberg 2003; Bunse 2009), the primary question focuses on whether these presidencies 'matter' in reaching decisions and whether the incumbents were able to use their position for shifting the final outcome of the decision in favour of their own preferences or those of their country of origin (e.g. Elgström 2003; Beach and Mazzucelli 2008; Alexandrova and Timmermans 2013). Tallberg (2006) examines the influence of formal leadership of the rotating presidency in multilateral bargaining in the European Council. He focuses on negotiations using a formal model and testing theoretical propositions based on rational choice institutionalism. The overall conclusion of this research is that the presidencies do matter and that some presidencies are more effective than others in brokering deals. Some scholars in addition emphasise that the office can, under certain circumstances, be exploited in favour of partisan goals of the chair (Tallberg 2006; Schalk et al. 2007; Thompson 2008; Leconte 2012). Most recently, a few studies have explored the role of the permanent presidency of the European Council in facilitating decision-making among its members (Howorth 2011; Dinan 2013).

The leadership role of individual heads of state or government in European affairs is also fairly well researched. These studies revolve particularly around the powerful member states, such as, France, Germany and the United Kingdom (UK) (Bulmer and Paterson 2013). Yet these studies are rarely underpinned by explicit leadership theories. Rather, they provide a dense description of which leaders were dominant in which situations and to which extent they were crucial in influencing the outcome of a decision or achieving major integration steps. As for groups of states, the Franco-German tandem and its role as the motor of integration has been of paramount interest (Schild 2010; Krotz and Schild 2013).

Another set of leadership research regarding the EU focuses on the exercise of political leadership in specific situations of the integration process: for example, the negotiations on Treaty revisions, that is, the 'big bangs' in European integration, decisions in specific crisis situations, or in negotiations on highly contested issues (Kleine 2007; Beach and Mazzucelli 2008). But also in these cases the leadership function is seen to be linked to certain institutional actors, which take the lead, encouraged by windows of opportunities and also by their regular institutional resources. Occasionally, there are also studies which mainly question the exercise of leadership in the EU, as for example the contributions to the edited volume by Hayward (2008) with the provoking title 'Leaderless Europe'. Finally, the leadership issue is also touched in broader analyses of European institutions (see e.g. on the European Parliament Judge and Earnshaw 2008).

Besides these explicit studies on political leadership in the EU, there has also been research on the ability of institutions to affect the outcome of integration. These analyses focus, among others, on the Council of the EU and the European Council (Bickerton, Hodson, and Puetter 2015), on the role of the Court of Justice (Bell 2008), or on the leadership of the European Central Bank (ECB) (Grözinger 2014). Other studies emphasise the importance of power elites, policy networks (Kingah, Schmidt and Yong 2016) and institutional structures in

shaping European integration. Furthermore there has been quite some research on the role of ideas held by elites (Marcussen 2000; Verdun 2000), advocacy coalitions (Sabatier 1998), business lobbies (Cowles 2001; Van Apeldoorn 2004) and interest groups (Beyers, Eising, and Maloney 2010) on the course of integration. Though this literature is less specific in making the connection with political leadership per se, the insights of these studies for an understanding of how the EU moves forward for instance in times of crisis, and who or which institutions ‘mattered’ in this process, should not be dismissed.

Summing up, we conclude that there is already a certain amount of research on political leadership in the EU, which mainly revolves around the role and function of specific institutional actors and their leadership capacities in an environment of weak institutional resources and varying situational contexts. For a large part, this research is based on a dense description of events and activities; much less attention has been given to political leadership theories.

The guiding questions and contributions

The contributions to this collection in many respects transcend the present state of the art in leadership research on the EU and do so in the following way. The spectrum of issues has been expanded by covering a broader set of institutions – the Commission, the European Parliament and the European Central Bank – by analysing new institutions such as the standing presidency of the European Council, by revisiting well known performances, by systematically comparing leadership performances of those holding supranational office as well as some key national political leaders, who play an important role in Europe, as well as by analysing political leadership in specific circumstances and in specific issue areas (international climate change negotiations). Furthermore, unusual means and strategies of exercising leadership have drawn attention, such as the exercise of leadership through ideas or by drawing on administrative resources. Finally, several of our papers present innovative analytical tools for analysing leadership at European level.

On the whole, the contributions in this volume seek to answer questions like: what kind of leadership is there in the domain they are studying? How do they see political leadership occur in their specific case study? How does it operate in the case study, what lessons can we learn about the tools used in exercising political leadership and how effective have those been?

The first group of contributions in this collection refers to the European Commission and its capacities to lead under conditions of limited opportunities and major constraints. George Ross and Jane Jenson revisit the extraordinary leadership of Jacques Delors, whom the authors regard, with reference to Burns, as a highly successful transformative leader. Yet they point out that even such a gifted and entrepreneurial leader is confronted with severe constraints. Thus the authors conclude that Delors’ successes were due to his creative ideas, the mobilisation of the Commission, and a unique strategy of engrenage. However, when Delors could no more propose win-win projects for the member states, his successes waned.

Henriette Müller compares the agenda-setting leadership of three Commission presidents – Hallstein, Delors and Barroso. In particular, the author analyses when Commission presidents announce their agenda, which main political topics they promote, how these relate to major political events, and how the incumbents further develop these issues over time. The analysis reveals huge differences in providing agenda-setting

leadership. Delors and Hallstein performed as successful agenda-setters by containing the number of issues and pushing them forward early on during their tenure. By contrast Barroso's leadership appears as rather poor, as he overloaded his agenda with too many and too general issues, put forward with delays.

Michelle Cini and Marian Suplata take on a different perspective on the Commission, by analysing its *policy* leadership. The authors focus on the conditions for exercising policy leadership and frame it in terms of political agency and policy capacity. On the basis of a case study on the regulation of international mobile roaming, the authors conclude that in this case, the agency of individual leaders, particularly successive Commissioners who kept the issue on the agenda and vigorously pushed it forward, met with a series of contextual factors such as the relationship of the issue to wider political agendas and the support of the European Parliament. The authors conclude that even a weakened Commission can, under certain conditions, successfully exercise policy leadership.

Two contributions in this volume analyse the leadership of the standing president of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy. Desmond Dinan explores how Van Rompuy, as the first incumbent in this position, built up and thus shaped to a far-reaching degree the office. While he emphasises the inherently institutional constraints which the president faces vis-à-vis the powerful heads of state or government and an extremely challenging situation context, he shows that Van Rompuy nevertheless was able to successfully exercise leadership, due to his personal qualities. In particular, Van Rompuy succeeded in establishing excellent relationships with national capitals and other EU institutions and actors; furthermore, he skilfully brokered compromises under extremely unfavourable conditions, that is, in times of severe crises.

Ingeborg Tömmel analyses Van Rompuy's leadership performance from a different perspective. It questions whether the incumbent, acting in an intergovernmental arena but holding a supranational office, fulfils his position by strengthening the intergovernmental dimension of the EU or rather by acting in line with the supranational institutions. In the first case, Van Rompuy would perform as transactional leader; in the second case, he would exercise transforming leadership. On the basis of a case study that traces the European Council negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014–2020, Tömmel concludes that Van Rompuy focused on brokering a compromise, mainly in the interest of the most powerful member states, and that his leadership was at best transactional.

Michael Shackleton examines the activities of the European Parliament (EP) from a leadership perspective. Even though parliaments are not conceived of as political leaders, the author claims that the EP played a leading role in transforming the character of representative democracy in the EU. The EP for a long time of its history emphasised the principle of separation of powers as constitutive for the European polity. By contrast, with the launch in 2014 of a new procedure for electing the Commission president, it pursued a concept of a parliamentary government. Shackleton concludes that it will prove difficult to reverse this 'institutional revolution'.

Amy Verdun focuses on the leadership of the ECB and how that institutions jumped in when the usual institutions were unable to take speedy action. This contribution examines in particular the type of role the ECB played in EU governance, in response to the financial, the economic and sovereign debt crises. Verdun shows how the ECB stretched its mandate in order to secure the stability of the euro area and analyses some policies that aimed at supporting the euro. She concludes that the two presidents of the ECB acted as

transformative leaders during the crisis periods and that they managed to get the Governing Council and EU member states to follow suit.

Femke van Esch analyses the inherent tensions that heads of state or government face when acting at the European level. She argues that in the multilevel system of the EU, national leaders have to balance more variegated demands of followers while facing weaker and often contradictory vectors of legitimate leadership. Van Esch develops an analytical framework that differentiates between four vectors of legitimate leadership. By analysing the performance of two national leaders – German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras – Van Esch unravels the paradoxes of exercising leadership in the multilevel EU system and shows that, in spite of their diverging power position, both leaders face similar contradictions.

Christer Karlsson and Charles F. Parker examine the EU leadership role in global environmental policy. In particular, they look at the outcome of the 2015 COP21 climate summit in Paris. Karlsson and Parker assess whether the EU is actually recognised as a leader by potential followers and to what extent the EU has exercised various modes of political leadership. Their findings reveal a fragmented leadership landscape in which the EU must adjust its leadership strategies in relation to other powerful actors, such as the United States (US) and China. Furthermore, Karlsson and Parker conclude that the EU is most successful when exercising various leadership modes in combination, while it is constrained in exercising structural leadership.

In drawing conclusions regarding the overall results of the individual studies, we can certainly state that the EU is by no means leaderless (Hayward 2008). On the contrary, many leaders in the European arena, either individuals or complex organizations, play in various ways a role. Yet the opposite statement, that too many leaders dominate the Union and that the contradictions between them prevent successful leadership, is also not convincing. Rather, political leadership in the EU is characterised by a complex interplay between a multitude of leaders or leading organizations with diverging powers and prerogatives, objectives and constituents or followers. This interplay reflects the complex structure of a multi-level and a multi-state system that has to balance many divergent interests and to find common solutions for complex problems. In other words: it reflects a complex set of checks and balances.

This finding however does not mean that political leadership in the EU is in a good or at least an adequate state. As the individual contributions of this issue reveal, all leaders in the EU face serious constraints, either because of not disposing of the necessary formal or real powers, or because of an unfavourable situational context, or because of severe legitimacy dilemmas. Furthermore, European leaders are often not able to supply sufficient leadership. This situation emerges not only because of their lack of capacities, but also because of their incomplete knowledge about intricate problems. In addition, the institutional structure of the EU, with 28 member states and unwieldy procedures of decision-making, is not always conducive to a balanced interplay between European leaders representing different constituencies, let alone to speedy reactions in case of crises. In particular the shift of power to the intergovernmental institutions in relevant policy areas without establishing powerful counterweights has led to decisions biased in favour of powerful member states, to stalemates and non-decision or, as in the case of the ECB, to actors taking on a leadership role which were not envisaged to perform such a function.

In theoretical terms, the contributions in this volume constitute progress as compared to the state of the art described above. It is true we did not present completely new theoretical approaches, let alone one comprehensive approach that encompasses the various, often contradicting facets of EU leadership. Yet the contributions of this volume show that both classical concepts of political leadership in national and international contexts as well as more recent theoretical innovations provide useful tools for analysing leadership in the context of the EU. Furthermore, our contributions reveal that refining and adapting existing approaches to the specific conditions and circumstances of a complex multilevel system allow for elaborating on and highlighting the multifaceted opportunities and constraints which institutional and individual leaders face at European level.

The study of political leadership in the EU has come a long way, even though there is still a lot of work to be done in this area. This collection has sought to contribute a bit more to the existing literature on political leadership and indicate some of the differences between EU level political leadership to both the national and international arena. Especially as the EU is facing criticism, it is wonderful to be able offer an extensive overview of these kinds of developments in the EU. EU level leaders have emerged to solve the crisis; it is entirely possible that it will take leaders of all kinds as well as people following these leaders to solve complex EU level societal problems.

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