The Impact of the Commission Presidents on EU Policies
Analyzing the Political Leadership Performance in Supranational Governance

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“[T]he leadership qualities of Delors serve as a stark reminder that the formal rules are only part of the story, and that the authority of the office of President also depends on the individual occupying it.”
(Christiansen 2001: 755)

“Political institutions and processes operate through human agency. It would be remarkable if they were not influenced by the properties that distinguish one individual from another.”
(Greenstein 1992: 124)

When looking at the process of policy making at the European level, the European Commission appears as the supreme creator and proposer of policies through its (legal) right of initiative. On the one hand, the central role of the Commission in formulating EU policies is thus evident. If we, on the other hand, examine the individual impact of the different elements inside the Commission in shaping these policies and their final outcome, research has been difficult and comprehensive studies rather rare (Hartlapp et al. 2013). As its most senior representative, it can be assumed that the Commission president plays a central role in this body’s policy formulation process; from initiating these policies inside the Commission, to mediating and representing them in the broader European institutional framework. However, the actual performance or ‘authorship of policies’ (Howlett/Lejano 2012: 11) by the presidents has not yet been fully investigated. This paper presents a theoretical model of how to analyze comprehensively and compare systematically the political leadership performance of different Commission presidents in order to enable future assessments of their actual impact on the Commission’s policy formulation process.

The paper is organized into three main parts that are based on the three first chapters of my dissertation (I introduction, II Commission presidents, and III theoretical foundations). First, the paper will outline the benefits of applying political leadership theory to the performance analysis of Commission presidents. It covers the different leadership tasks of the
office and then introduces the institutional opportunities and constraints of the Commission presidency, before cursorily elaborating the performances and impact on European policies of some incumbents, namely Walter Hallstein, Jacques Delors and José Barroso. In a second step, the paper applies the different leadership demands of the office to the theoretical analysis of political leadership, thereby creating a typology of the different, most likely leadership performance patterns. Based on this, it presents and integrates the variables influencing political leadership into a coherent model of corresponding phases and functions of the political leadership process in order to provide a systematic analysis of political leadership performance.

1 Weak Institution but Strong Leaders? – The Commission Presidency in perspective

The presidency of the European Commission and its capacity to offer leadership whether in designing, mediating or representing policies, as well as the capacities of this leadership, are subject to controversial discussion both among EU scholars and practitioners (Kassim et al. 2013: 152). The problem is twofold: For one part, there is a conflict between functional demands and actual powers in the conditions for a successful presidency. For another, the question of comparability of incumbents arises due to the many institutional changes from past to present. While the Commission presidency broadly resembles the position of a national head of government, it “confronts a more complex environment, lacks the resources available to most heads of government, and is subject to stricter constraints.” (Kassim 2013a: 1)

In other words, the Commission presidency is politically demanding, while at the same time it is an institutionally weak office. However, although the presidency is not expected from the EU institutional system to produce strong leaders, some incumbents, in particular Walter Hallstein and Jacques Delors, have provided strong political leadership with far-reaching EU policies. Therefore, my dissertation’s research question does not ask whether the presidents are able to provide leadership at all, but rather why do Commission presidents differ in their leadership performance? In the following, this puzzle of strong political demands, weak institutional resources but great performing incumbents will be elaborated in order to substantiate the application of political leadership theory to the office of the European Commission presidency.

Between EU Policies and European Politics – The Leadership Demands of the Office

Since the Rome Treaty in 1957, the Commission initiates and proposes European legislation (1957, Art. 155). As its first representative, the Commission president has thus always aimed
to provide political guidance and to formulate the strategic goals and policies of the Commission and the Community more broadly. “Agenda-setting [thereby, H.M.] […] involves making choices over the relative salience of individual dossiers, judgments as to their relative merits, efforts to get proposals into a shape in which they can be negotiated, and an assessment of their acceptability by the Council [and the Parliament, H.M.].” (Hayes-Renshaw/Wallace 1997: 186) Therefore, they seek to stipulate and prioritize the political agenda towards the College of commissioners, as well as through annually delivering the Commission’s working program and state-of-the-union address to the Parliament, and through reports towards the Council. 1 It was the Nice Treaty (2002) which first explicitly codified that the Commission “shall work under the political guidance of its President, who shall decide on its internal organisation in order to ensure that it acts consistently [and, H.M.] efficiently” (Art. 217).

Nonetheless, earlier incumbents had equally sought to provide political guidance and strategic agenda-setting, by it to influence the design and scope of European policies. While the Rome Treaty left many “unknown or ‘grey’ [political, H.M.] areas”, much depended on the College and its president “to prioritise the issues and thus clarify the future agendas of the Community.” (Endo 1999: 38) For example, Walter Hallstein initiated the program for an accelerated completion of the customs union (Hallstein plan). Roy Jenkins revived the issue of the European Monetary System (EMS), Gaston Thorn shaped the ESPRIT initiative on research and technology, and Jacques Delors initiated the Single European Act and Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) (Delors Report). Hence, Commission presidents can provide strategic agenda-setting for the union or at least share this task with other institutional actors. In terms of leadership, this demand to provide general political guidelines as well as prioritize and design a concrete political agenda can be clarified as agenda-setting leadership (ibid.: 38-39).

The next set of demands comprises mediation in the European Council and increasingly the European Parliament, as well as administrating the Commission, as the president may be a more effective mediator among different institutional actors, if they manage their institution successfully. With regard to the different actors inside the Commission from commissioners to DGs, skills of mediation, coalition- and consensus-building are equally essential. Mediation and management are therefore two sides of the same coin: The first refers to the political sphere of implementing formulated policies by

1 The state-of-the-union address has been institutionalized by José Barroso and is delivered annually to the European Parliament since 2010. Kassim 2013b: 14 (PEU-DP).
negotiating and creating compromises among different actors both in- and outside the Commission. The latter points to the procedural side of this political process, namely that no political initiation and its legal implementation are possible without its proper administration (Cini 1996: 22). In this sense, it is essential to his leadership performance to build coalitions, and to invest in consensus-building by “identifying, persuading, cajoling and at times threatening other key actors, using all sorts of mediative talents”, while at the same time investing in the management of the organization to extend its policy competences, administrative and budgetary resources to “lift of institutional constraints.” (Endo 1999: 37, 36) As these demands indicate, mediation and administration are inseparably linked with each other, which may mean that a clear-cut distinction of these tasks is hardly possible and more of methodological assistance (Hayes-Renshaw/Wallace 1997: 186-189). Notwithstanding in terms of leadership tasks, these two demands can be defined as mediative-institutional leadership (Endo 1999: 36-37).

A third demand comprises the president’s tasks of external representation of the Commission and the European Union in the European public spheres and on world stage (Cini 1996: 14; Stevens/Stevens 2001: 136-137; Boucher 2006: 74). In this sense, the president does not only represent the Commission and defend its influence and prestige; in addition, he or she serves as promoter and defender of the ‘community interest’. Although the link between the Commission presidency and the European public spheres is less strong than between national leaders and their national public spheres, especially as Europeans do not elect the Commission president; the president nonetheless holds one of the highest public offices at the European level. Thus, if the democratic input legitimacy of the position does not equal those of national leaders, it does not mean that the Commission president is not accountable and does not need to be responsive to the European people. Rather, the presidents are even more dependent on a strong legitimacy of their actions, and thus on a positive image in the European public spheres (Tömmel 2008: 140). This demand to not only technically represent the Commission and its proposed policies, but build and create a positive image of the institution, can be identified as public leadership.

2 Since the introduction of the permanent Council presidency, the Commission president shares the task for external representation of the union with the Council president. Boucher 2006: 76; Hayes-Renshaw/Wallace 1997: 90ff.
3 It is evident that the community interest is not one monolithic interest, but that it “is the product of a much more complicated process of bargaining at the European level.” Thus if the Commission represents the common interest it also includes perspective on self-preservation and partial interests. Cini 1996: 16-17; Boucher 2006: 76.
To sum up, the Commission presidency demands for three interdependent but equally important functions of leadership, first, agenda-setting leadership, second, mediative-institutional leadership, and third, public leadership. These leadership functions demonstrate that the Commission president is “endowed with an eminent political function” comparable to national public offices at the highest level (Tömmel 2013: 789). One would assume that the institutional resources at the president’s disposal match with these far-reaching demands. However, as the following section will outline, there is a stark cleavage between the office’s political demands and its actual institutional powers to design EU policies and thus shape European policy making and politics.

The President’s Institutional Resources and Constraints – Glass Half-Full or Half-Empty?

Although the signatories of the Rome Treaties delegated a set of important functions to the Commission president of the then European Economic Community (EEC) (as outlined above from policy initiation, to policy mediation and administrative management) the European founding fathers neither directly defined the president’s powers, nor granted them political resources that distinguished them from other commissioners (Kassim 2013a: 2; Tömmel 2013: 789-790; Kassim et al. 2013: 155). However, the presidency came to play a leading role in the Commission as well as in the European political system more generally, in particular due to the performance of its first incumbent Walter Hallstein (Kassim et al. 2013: 155). Therefore, although it is only since the three latest treaty revisions of Maastricht (1995), Amsterdam (1998) and Lisbon (2009) that the president has been formally vested with political powers such as to determine the general guidelines of the Commission, to influence the appointment of commissioners, to distribute portfolios, or to link the General-Secretariat to their presidency, incumbents prior to these amendments have also sought to provide such leadership – even though to different degrees and with different strategies (Staeglich 2007: 190; Endo 1999: 40).

On the one hand, the formalization of the office’s internal powers seems to establish a preeminence of the Commission president vis-à-vis the other commissioners, thus presidentializing the Commission (Kassim 2013b: 15; Kassim et al. 2013: 174ff.). On the other hand, many of the ‘new’ rights of the president have been part of informal usage since the first Commission. It is therefore less a presidentialization of the office, than the attempt to bring the office in line with the new intra-institutional challenges of heterogeneity and fragmentation, which have mainly derived from the multiple EU enlargement rounds of the years 1995, 2004, 2007, 2013, and thus with the practice of exercising the office (Döring
2007: 224-225; Egeberg 2006: 11; Smith 2003: 140, 142; Spence 2006: 38-29,55; Staeglich 2007: 172). A true increase in political or presidential power has not yet taken place: Although the Commission presidents can influence the appointment of other commissioners, they are far from a free selection process. They still also have one vote and no power of coalition obligation in the College (Kassim et al. 2013: 156). Therefore, although the office’s institutional resources, if at all, derive from inside the Commission, supporting the president in determining the Commission’s internal organization and strategically shaping its policy formation process. These institutional resources, though the latest amendments are helpful in better exerting the office, remain nonetheless weak, especially with regard to the office’s demands and as such to national heads of government and state (Moravcsik 1999: 268).

In contrast to the resources, the institutional constraints mainly derive from the inter-institutional relationship between the Commission and the Council as well as the Parliament. They constrain the president in four ways: First, the president and the College of commissioners are appointed by Council and approved by Parliament; second, the Commission’s budget is controlled by the same two institutions; third, the Commission is committed to shared executive responsibilities with the Council and legislative responsibilities with the Parliament; and fourth, the president may increasingly become constrained by the steadily growing number of commissioners due to the multiple EU enlargement rounds, and is therefore vulnerable to political heterogeneity and fragmentation inside the College (Nugent 2001: 62; Endo 1999: 69-70; Nasshoven 2011: 84-87; Rasmussen 2007: 245). These institutional risks have not only been inherent to the presidency since the foundation of the Commission; they have also increased over the decades. Whereas the right of initiative has long been the primal right of the Commission and thus provided the president with a strong position to propose political initiatives and design EU policies, the Council has achieved to limit this right in new policy areas, thereby constraining the negotiating position of the Commission president. With regard to these constraints and the rather weak resources, it appears that political leadership can hardly be provided from an office like this one. As it stands, the glass appears to be half-empty.

However, even institutional constraints can be partly reshuffled into resources. For example, the principle of allowing one commissioner per member state increases the legitimacy of the Commission and thus its president to provide policy solutions for the whole European Union. Moreover, the Commission president may even benefit from the multitude of commissioners. If there are many commissioners, no single commissioner is able to build a power base against the president. In addition, although the Parliament represents dependence
on yet another institutional player, it may again increase the political legitimacy of the Commission, and thus the political weight of its president especially towards the European Council. Therefore, although there are only few institutional resources and rather enormous institutional constraints to exert the office successfully, this observation indicates that both resources and constraints are not necessarily fixed categories; rather many of their aspects seem to depend on the incumbent’s individual political judgment to determine them as either resources or constraints.

To sum up, these observations indicate that although there have been revisions of EU treaties towards the presidency, the balance of resources and constraints has remained relatively stable with generally weak institutional opportunities to provide leadership. It means that increased resources, especially inside the Commission, have been neutralized by the increased constraints both in- and outside the Commission (Nugent 2001: 18). However, even though the office “is not [institutionally, H.M.] designed to exercise political leadership; […], the incumbent is not able to fulfill the functions attributed to him without exercising such leadership.” (Tömmel 2013: 790) Moreover, if there have been already incumbents who successfully exerted the office in such a rather rough institutional environment, political leadership does not only indicate the formal authority of an office. Rather, it entails a more relational and complex concept of political interaction. Thus the basic argument of my research project is that Commission presidents do matter in creating, mediating and representing EU policies, but that their impact varies according to how the different incumbents deal with the institutional structure and situational circumstances during the different phases of the policy making process. Therefore successful political leadership performance seems to rely strongly on the incumbent’s personal ambitions, political and institutional abilities, as well as their political capital of how they aim to fulfill the demanded functions. In other words, it seems to depend on the incumbent’s own interpretation as to whether the glass is half-full or half-empty.

From Hallstein to Barroso – Some Insights on the Incumbents and their Situational Settings

The twelve presidents of the European Commission, from Walter Hallstein to José Barroso, have assumed office at different stages of the process of European integration, entering with a wide range of ambitions, purposes and goals; they have applied different strategies and leadership styles to the challenges of the office (Kassim et al. 2013: 161). As has been indicated, leadership performance in institutionally weak contexts seems to rely strongly on the presidential personality and its handling of the institutional and situational environment.
Three of them in particular stand out for their performance: Walter Hallstein, Jacques Delors and José Barroso.\footnote{These three presidents serve as the case studies of the research project. They have been selected with regard to the length of their incumbencies, only these three presidents have served nearly ten years in office; they have faced major crises of the process of European integration during their terms, from the Empty chair crisis (Hallstein), to the Maastricht referendum crisis (Delors), and the financial and economic crisis since 2010 (Barroso); they have also presided the Commission during the different institutional stages of the EU institutions from EEC, to EC and EU; finally they represent the three major types of political-bureaucratic backgrounds of the Commission presidents, technocratic (Hallstein), politico-technocratic (Delors), and political (Barroso).}

A German law professor and Staatssekretär under Adenauer, Walter Hallstein (1958-67) had become the first Commission president of the then European Economic Community in 1958. He already enjoyed a great political reputation for his commitment to European integration as he led the German delegations during the negotiations on the treaties of Paris and Rome (Dinan 2004: 50; Endo 1999: 89). His personal and political ambition was to create and build the administrative apparatus of the EEC Commission “as equivalent to national administrations.” (Kassim et al.: 161; Seidel 2010: 69; Gillingham 2003: 57) In this sense, he was successful in pursuing the Commission “with a pioneering spirit and that its services were adequately staffed and structured.” (Nugent 2001: 28; Coombes 1970: 308-309) The U.S. press frequently referred to him as ‘Mr. Europe,’ while he may have once called himself the “European prime minister.” (Peterson 2006: 504) Until the mid 1960s, the EEC Commission made progressive developments in policy formulation and implementation: from the policy proposal of accelerating the time table for the establishment of the customs union (the Hallstein plan), over launching difficult agreements on internal tariffs, quotas and common external tariffs, to the implementation of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) (Nugent 2001: 30; Peterson 2012: 98; Dinan 2004: 84). However, although he was observed to be an ‘impressive performer’ in the Council of Ministers, Hallstein also provoked resistance and criticism, in particular by the French president Charles de Gaulle, finally culminating in the Empty chair crisis (1965/66) (Kassim et al. 2013: 161). Although Hallstein was by no means the only one responsible for the crisis, his personal reputation and the Commission’s power position strongly suffered from it.

After nearly ten years of stagnation in the process of European integration and some progress during the incumbencies of Roy Jenkins (1977-81) and Gaston Thorn (1981-85), Jacques Delors (1985-95) was appointed as the eighth president of the European Commission in 1985. A former French Economics and Finance minister, who had also worked in the Commissariat général du plan, Delors strongly shaped the Single European Act (SEA) (Nugent 2001: 42, 43). Moreover, Delors convinced European leaders to set up a high-level
committee to consider and initiate an Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). Although he headed the Commission in an enhancing situational context with regard to economic and political developments in the 1980s, major policies at European level carried his mark (Dinan 2004: 205-206). However, Delors also suffered from setbacks, such as the results of the referenda in Denmark and France on the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty (a defeat and narrow victory respectively), or Margaret Thatcher’s opposition to implement a European social charter. Moreover, although Delors was famous for his “negotiating and mediating skills” among the heads of member states, he applied an obsessive and secretive style inside the Commission, relying only on few trusted officials, thus partly degrading the College of commissioners to a secretariat (ibid.: 238, 242). Nonetheless, Delors strongly enhanced the position of the Commission especially in the public spheres, and politically and institutionally transformed the European Community.

After the foundation of the European Union (1995) and the biggest accession round in the history of the process of European integration (2004), José Manuel Durão Barroso (2005-14), a former Prime Minister of Portugal, heads the Commission since 2005. He has been the first Commission president who benefitted from the aforementioned treaty reforms. Barroso’s ambition has been to presidentialize the Commission in order to vest it with the authority of ‘last resort’ (Kassim 2013b: 17). Barroso has thus reconfigured the position of the presidency by empowering his cabinet and bringing the General Secretariat into close political alignment with the presidency (Kassim et al. 2013: 174). In this sense, Barroso contributed to the institutionalization of the office, as he helped to align the office’s powers with its increased intra- and inter-institutional demands. Therefore, it can be assumed that “whereas Hallstein and Delors relied on personal standing and authority […] Barroso’s power has been rooted in the constitutional strengthening of the office […].” (Kassim et al. 2013: 174) Although Barroso has been able to consolidate and centralize the Commission, the Council’s permanent president, Herman Van Rompuy, has increasingly constrained him in contributing to the agenda-setting demands at European level especially since the outbreak of the European economic and financial debt crisis in 2010.

These cursory snapshots of the performances of Hallstein, Delors and Barroso demonstrate that the successive incumbents have applied different political ambitions, as well as political and institutional abilities to cope with the challenges of the office at their times. For example, the political agendas set by Hallstein and Delors amplified their strong political ambitions, which were both broad in scope towards deepening European integration, while at the same time their agendas entailed concrete policy proposals. These presidents may thus be
assessed with strong agenda-setting leadership. With regard to their politico-bureaucratic backgrounds, it appears surprising that Hallstein who had a technocratic background, and Delors, whose background entails both technocratic and political experiences, had developed more far-reaching political agendas than Barroso, although he had the strongest political experience as a former prime minister.

With regard to the demand for mediative-institutional leadership, Hallstein’s failure to estimate correctly the actual support for his package deal in the Council of Ministers may lead to a mixed assessment of his mediative-institutional leadership performance. Instead, Barroso, though not approaching strong policies, seems to be successful in exploiting the institutional resources and in increasing the presidential power basis at least inside the Commission. Thus, Barroso may be judged with partly successful mediative-institutional leadership. With regard to the policy proposals of the Single European Act and the Economic and Monetary Union, it can be assumed that Delors exerted a successful mediative-institutional leadership in the European Council as it would have been difficult otherwise to convince the member states of such far-reaching political and institutional changes in the EU political system.

In terms of public leadership, Hallstein first seemed to be successful as the press referred to him as ‘Mr. Europe’ and he enjoyed a high public visibility. However, the Empty chair crisis strongly diminished this reputation, and scholars later even referred to him as the ‘forgotten European’ (Loth et al. 1995). Instead, Delors appears to be most successful as he pursued the Commission with a positive image in the public sphere during most of his term. Barroso, on the other hand, seems to suffer from a lack of public attention especially in terms of agenda-setting, which may be caused by the office of the permanent Council president.

To sum up, these observations have amplified that although the Commission presidency is not expected, from the institutional structure of the office, to produce strong leaders, these leaders have nonetheless emerged over time – even though to varying degree and approaches. They have applied different political ambitions as well as political and institutional abilities to cope with the political leadership demands of the office, from agenda-setting, to mediative-institutional and public leadership. Moreover, it can be observed that major European policies in the process of Europe’s integration have been launched alongside these ambitious Commission presidents (Drake 2000: 58-61). However, although this assumption may be generally correct, it also invites criticism and doubts regarding the president’s actual impact towards these policies. For example, Hallstein’s influence on launching the Common Agricultural Policy can be questioned vis-à-vis the importance of commissioner Sicco Mansholt who was in charge of agriculture. Moreover, the Single
European Act also heavily relied on the ‘White Paper for Completing the Internal Market’, which was prepared authoritatively by commissioner Arthur Lord Cockfield who was in charge for the internal market. Therefore, although leadership can be reasonably attributed to the Commission presidents, only the in-depth elaboration of their performances enables the researcher to assess not only cursorily but systematically and comprehensively how and to what extent Commission presidents shape EU policies in the different stages of the policy process. Hence, the second part of this paper aims to operationalize the concept of political leadership performance.

2 Researching Political Leadership – The Interactionist Approach

While leadership is an indefinite, abstract concept of social interaction, one general definition or theory of leadership does not exist (Cronin/Genovese 2012: 35; Elgie 1995: 2, 4; Endo 1999: 13-14; Edinger 1975: 255). Whereas, for instance, social psychologists expect the person with the most personal influence to be the leader, political scientists identify that person as leader who by office and formal political authority is able to be most influential.\(^5\) Even from the perspective of the constituencies no clear picture can be drawn: For example, leaders should be visionaries, guiding their voters by new ideas. Yet people also desire realism and pragmatism (Cronin/Genovese 2012: 3, 12f.). Although leaders are supposed to lead and provide political direction, it is also evident that leaders follow the direction given by polls and people’s preferences (ibid.: 4, 20f.). For this reason, scholars often assess that the study of political leadership would either be as of yet incomplete or that there would exist as many definitions and theories as there have been scholars thus far (Helms 2005: 34, 36; Gast 2011: 13, 22; Blondel 1987: 1; Paige 1977: 3; Edinger 1975: 253-254).

The exemplary contradictions do not only demonstrate the complex nature of leadership. Instead, they provide a first and essential characteristic, namely, that all leadership is contextual, because “the simple rationale for leadership studies” points to the leader’s impact on “situations, institutions, systems and events.” (Endo 1999: 15-16; Blondel 1987: 4, 28; Edinger 1975: 261, 264) However, while the leader’s impact derives from the causal relationship between the leader and their environment, it makes more sense to apply a process-oriented perspective instead of a consequence-oriented viewpoint (Endo 1999: 18; Cox 1969: 211; Capano 2009: 15). As a result, leadership is understood as a dynamic reciprocal process between leaders and their environment, “being at one and the same time an

individual task and a collective enterprise.” (Capano 2009: 18; Ahlquist/Levi 2011: 5) With regard to this understanding, the analysis thus focuses on the leader’s performance, thereby assuming that “active political leadership [means that] a leader, as opposed to a mere office-holder, makes intensive use of [institutional, H.M.] resources and [situational, H.M.] opportunities, and may even be able to expand and create them” in order to set, mediate and represent mutually desired goals (Endo 1999: 28; Greenstein 1992: 109).

In this sense, the formal power and authority of an office assist in the development of political leadership but should not be confused with it. Whereas power and authority imply a one-directional hierarchy of political decision-making, a successful political leadership performance derives from the dialectical process between leaders and their institutional-situational environment, by which leaders are guided by influence and agreement-building instead of coercive power. Therefore, although headship entails the opportunity of leading by granting a ‘modicum of authority’ and ‘resources to command’, it remains either too passive towards political interaction or too oppressive by insisting on formal authority (Cronin/Genovese 2012: 38). Consequently, leadership is understood as an asymmetrically reciprocal process in which leaders have, of course, greater attention and influence, but only if followers let them do so, thereby implying that followers have a choice (Ahlquist/Levi 2011: 5; Cronin/Genovese 2012: 39; Edinger 1975: 258).6

The Interactionist Approach of Political Leadership

Based on Blondel’s general analysis of political leadership, the interactionist approach has emerged as a holistic concept in studying political leadership performance by examining equally “the personal characteristics of the leaders, the instruments they have at their disposal, and the situations they face.” (Blondel 1987: 25)7 The general basis of this account is that the interactions of these three independent variables, first, personal predispositions (Pp), second, institutional structure (Is), and third situational setting (Ss) equally determine the political leadership performance, and therefore only contribute together to a better understanding of “the emergence, functioning, change, and decline […] of political leadership.” (Paige 1997:

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6 A group of followers may range from the inner circle or ‘entourage’ of a leader, to the people who actively participate in the decision making process, to all other persons who are affected by its outcomes like a national constituency. Paige 1977: 100.

With regard to Paige, the formal statement proclaims: $PL[P]_{h-k} = f(Pp, Is, Ss) + e$ “Patterns of political leadership [performance, H.M.] are a function of [personal predispositions, institutional structure and situational setting] in reciprocal interaction, plus error variance for which these variables do not account, where $PL[P]$ refers to political leadership [performance], $[h]-k$ indicates the range of identifiable patterns, $Pp, Is, Ss$ refer to the three variables introduced above, and $e$ is an error term, a surrogate variable for those determinants of political leadership behavior that are not appreciated in this formulation.” (Paige 1977: 105)

The personal predispositions thereby comprise the aforementioned political ambitions, political and institutional abilities as well as the political capital of the incumbent (Endo 1999: 85, 87, 93, 95). The institutional structure entails perspectives on the institutional rules, institutional procedures, and organizational resources of the office (Elgie 1995: 14-15; Blondel 1987: 149, 156ff.; Boucher 2006: 46-47, 51-53; Kassim et al. 2013: 155). The situational setting instead refers to the ‘political time’ of the incumbency, more precisely, the historical legacy of the organization, as well as public attitudes and their general expectations towards the office (Elgie 1995: 21-23; Renshon 2012: 202; Paige 1977: 174). To that end, the interactionist approach concentrates on the analysis of the relationship between individual political actors, their institutional contexts and the wider situational conditions, because the sum of these relationships constitute the leadership performance (Helms 2005: 39, 43). As these relations develop over time, the interactionist perspective draws into assessment the factor of time in leadership analysis (Blondel 1987: 85).

Although it is relatively easy to claim that these three independent variables, personal predispositions, institutional structure and situational setting need to be elaborated alternately in order to analyze the dependent variable, which is the political leadership performance; it is difficult to combine them in a coherent and feasible analytical pattern. Therefore, although this framework of three independent variables helps to develop an analytical model for the holistic analysis of leadership performance as a relational process over time, broad generalizations should not be embraced too enthusiastically according to the complexity and

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8 The variables are chosen with regard to the multivariate-multidimensional linkage approach of Glenn D. Paige but with a varying distinction and definition. Paige analyzes political leadership from a purely theoretical perspective. He identifies three patterns, six variables and 18 dimensions that influence the input, process and outcome of political leadership. Although it is of analytical logic to identify a multivariate-multidimensional linkage approach, he did not conduct any empirical research with it. Although the variables chosen in this analysis partly refer to Paige, the main ambition in using them was to keep them consistent and relatable to the previous and following parts of the examination. In addition, Winston and Patterson found more than 91 dimensions influencing leadership; given that a universal variable-dimension system does not exist, the author’s preference is decisive. Paige 1977: 104ff; Winston/Patterson 2006: 7ff.
mutual dependence of each variable (ibid.: 194). Nonetheless, this research project aims to activate this framework in the comprehensive and comparative analysis of political leadership performance. Figure 1 finally summarizes the interactionist approach to study political leadership performance.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 1: The interactionist approach, following Elgie (1995), Blondel (1987) and Endo (1999) (own model)**

### 3 From Snapshot to Pictures in Motion – Analyzing Political Leadership Performance

The interactionist approach has contributed to the complexity of political leadership as it incorporates the three distinct variables of personal predispositions, institutional structure and situational setting into one analytical framework. The focus of this approach lies on the causal relationships between these variables, which determine the political leadership performance.

While my dissertation aims to analyze why the leadership performance differs among Commission presidents, this section will first identify different patterns of leadership performance and develop a coherent and flexible typology in order to compare leadership behavior among different incumbents. In a second step, it will systematically integrate the primary causal variables into one coherent methodological model (Paige 1977: 131).

**Creating a Typology: Patterns of Leadership Performance**

One of the classic approaches in assessing political leadership performance is making a distinction between *transformational* and *transactional* leadership (Northouse 2007: 175). While the latter focuses on the various exchanges between leaders and followers,
transformational leadership occurs when the engagement between leaders and followers “raise[s] one another to higher levels of motivation and morality.” (Burns 2010 [1978]: 20; Northouse 2007: 176) Although the two terms may be relatively clear in themselves, it is difficult to measure them as concepts: “Sometimes leaders transform the world but not their followers, or vice versa, and sometimes they use a transactional style to accomplish transformational objectives.” (Nye 2008: 64; Northouse 2007: 192) It is therefore difficult to measure leadership performance in dichotomies. Instead it is essential to develop different types of most likely performance patterns that refer to each other on a continuum.⁹

In order to develop a scheme of patterns, it is necessary to reassert that successful or active political leadership means “[to] make intensive use of [institutional, H.M.] resources and [situational, H.M.] opportunities, and [to] may even be able to expand and create them” in order to design, mediate and represent mutually desired goals (Endo 1999: 28; Greenstein 1992: 109). While the ‘mutually desired goals’ comprise the leader’s political ambitions that he or she has already set as the organization’s shared political agenda, the use and even creation of institutional resources and situational opportunities mean the exploitation of the institutional and situational environment. Therefore, two ingredients for a successful leadership performance become apparent: political ambitions and the exploitation of the institutional and situational context. These two elements of individual actors are necessary in order to fulfill the three main demands of public political offices, namely agenda-setting leadership, mediative-institutional leadership, and public leadership. Therefore political ambitions and the exploitation of the institutional-situational context can be linked with the three leadership demands in one typological matrix, which ranges from a strong political entrepreneurial leadership performance to a weak managerial office-holding performance:

⁹ Scholars have assessed several continuums thus far, among others, a continuum ranging from transformational over transactional to non-leadership, or a continuum varying from ‘tight’ to ‘flexible’ leadership. Northouse 2007: 180-181; Elcock 2001: 79.
First, a political entrepreneurial leadership performance pattern is given, when the leader has strong political ambitions, and demands for a far-reaching agenda; hence he or she provides strong agenda-setting leadership. Moreover, the leader is able to exploit and enhance the institutional and situational environment, and therefore provides strong meditative-institutional and public leadership (Capano 2009: 4). Consequently, this leadership performance is strong. With regard to our sample of the three presidents, Delors would largely fit this description.

Second, the executive leadership performance pattern is exerted, when at least two of the three demands are assessed positively. For example, although the leader’s political ambitions and scope for agenda-setting leadership appear rather limited or less innovative, the leader is nonetheless able to make extensive use of the institutional and situational environment, and thus offer meditative-institutional and public leadership, even though to a lesser degree than the entrepreneurial leader as determination to exploit the system correlates with one’s own ambitions. This leadership performance can thus be regarded as moderately strong. Looking at our sample, this pattern seems to be attributed to Hallstein with the variance of having set a strong agenda in accordance with the treaties. Moreover, his meditative-institutional and public leadership may be judged as moderately strong considering his successes prior to the Empty chair crisis and his failures that helped causing this crisis.

Third, the consultative leadership performance pattern is provided, when at least one of the three demands is assessed positively. One possible pattern may be although the leader has determined political ambitions and tries to set a coherent agenda, he or she is not able to use the institutional and situational context properly in order to realize the provided agenda, and thus relies heavily on other actors in order to provide political solutions. This leadership...
performance can be identified as moderately weak. Taking into consideration the three presidents, this pattern may be attributed to Barroso. Although Barroso seems to provide strong mediative-institutional leadership inside the Commission, it appears that he lacks a coherent political agenda and sufficient attention to interacting with the public.

Fourth, the managerial leadership performance pattern is given, when the incumbent lacks political ambition, and therefore a coherent political agenda. Moreover, he or she is not able to exert sufficient mediative-institutional or public leadership in order to fulfill the office’s general tasks properly. This leadership performance is to be regarded as weak or non-leadership.

This matrix of most likely leadership performance patterns neither portrays a definitive scale or continuum of leadership behavior, nor does it claim that there is one best pattern fitting all institutional-situational contexts (Hughes/Ginnett/Curphy 1993: 107). In particular, the second and third pattern may vary across the positive or negative assessments of the different demands and their distinct characteristics as indicated through the sign (±). Nonetheless, the typology helps to better identify and understand particular behavior preferences, how leaders tend to interact with their environment to exert their political office. In this sense, the exploitation of the institutional-situational context by the leader depends on his or her interpretation of this environment as either enhancing or constraining. Therefore, the matrix correlates the political ambitions and the exploitation of the institutional-situational context with each other on a continuum, instead of determining from an “objective” perspective whether the environment is enhancing or constraining, and what kind of most likely patterns could derive from it.

In conclusion, this matrix of most likely leadership performance patterns “provides a framework for assessing leadership in a broad way.” (ibid.: 107, 402) It helps to describe, explain and evaluate the major components of the political leadership performance, because it correlates the three distinct variables, personal predispositions, institutional structure and situational setting with each other, while at the same time focusing on the three leadership demands of public offices, namely agenda-setting leadership, mediative-institutional leadership, and public leadership. Finally, although the basic idea of this matrix is to provide flexibility in assessing a leader’s performance, meaning that the performance patterns may change with different institutional and situational environments, it can, however, be assumed that a leader usually has a dominant preferred pattern of interaction throughout his or her incumbency, which is modified but only rarely changed completely (Northouse 2007: 76). While this section has answered the question of what will be analyzed in terms of different
leadership performance patterns, the next section aims to systemize how the analysis of the introduced variables will be operationalized.

The Phases and Variables of Political Leadership Performance

While the interaction of the introduced variables is not static but dynamic, it has been already pointed out that political leadership has to be understood as a process and therefore as a performance (Wren 2007: 377). This perspective on leadership is advantageous for several reasons: First, it indicates the dynamic nature of political leadership within the political system vis-à-vis the leader and his or her environment. Second, it depicts leadership demands as occurring over a time span. Third, it implies that the leadership process is continuous, and thus, that its demands and approaches are an ever-present reality in political systems. Fourth and finally, the dynamic process-oriented view suggests that the leadership of a person can influence the nature, degree, and pace of change within this system (Harrison 1995: 409). However, while a process in itself may not be an adequate analytical category, it makes sense to differentiate the process into different functional phases.

Scholars have already developed different functional phases into which the leadership process can be separated. For example, Cox made an approach with regard to executive heads of international organizations: “First, the executive head must define an ideology which gives clear goals to the organization and prescribes a method for attaining these goals. […] Second, he must build a bureaucracy committed to this ideology and having a sense of its own independent international role. Third, he must make coalitions and alliances – which of their nature will be more implicit than formalized – to ensure support from a sufficient proportion of the constituents.” (Cox 1969: 213) Tucker also identified three tasks, which range from problem diagnosis, to decision-making for a certain political direction, to mobilization for this direction in the public community (Tucker 1995: 31). Blondel pointed in the same direction, focusing first on the leader’s problem analysis, then on the leader’s solution elaboration, the decision-making, and finally, the concentric ‘selling’ of this decision from the inner entourage to the wider public spheres (Blondel 1987: 138-139). Moravcsik with regard to informal EC entrepreneurs equally identified three core functions: “The first function is policy initiation, sometimes termed “informal agenda-setting”. […] The second function is mediation, in which the entrepreneur intervenes in ongoing interstate negotiations to propose new options or compromises. The third function is mobilization of domestic social support for an agreement

Harrison developed these arguments with regard to the managerial process of decision-making within organizations.
…]” (Moravcsik 1999: 272) Gast goes even further: From the rather narrow scheme of leadership tasks concentrated on the person, he suggests that leadership should be understood as a set of group functions (Gast 2011: 27). From Gast’s perspective, leadership is reciprocal and both a group process and function with the leader as queen bee and major shareholder.

On the one hand, these three different and at the same time overlapping perspectives indicate that the leader develops a certain agenda and “advance[s] workable proposals, underscore[s] potential material benefits, or link[s] the outcome to symbolic values”, then interacts with the institutional system in order to influence, mediate and mobilize institutional support, and then finally traces it back to the public sphere to implement and legitimate his or her political goals. On the other hand, the approaches equally demonstrate that leadership is a reciprocal or even group process between the leader and his or her environment. Gast therefore concludes that leadership cannot be analyzed without the follower’s perceptions towards the leader and his or her position (ibid.: 23). The expectations that followers have of their would-be leaders, and leaders who seem to do everything to meet these expectations best show this fact. Leadership in a democratic context thus means leading by incorporating the follower’s goals so that they follow voluntarily (Gast 2011: 24; Burns 2010: 38). In this sense, conflict appears as the motor of leadership, because leadership aims to turn individually opposing visions into a shared vision of consent (Northouse 2007: 3; Hartley/Benington 2011: 204).

Comparing the examples given by Cox, Tucker, Blondel, Moravcsik and Gast with the leadership demands of the Commission presidency, the analogies of functions and phases become apparent: The first phase entails “diagno[sing] the situation authoritatively”, and to develop a realizable political agenda accordingly (formulation phase = agenda-setting leadership). The second phase embraces mobilization and co-ordination to implement proclaimed goals through relationship development and institutional resource utilization (implementation phase = mediative-institutional leadership). The third phase entails the representation of the political decisions to the external world (representation phase = public leadership) (Tucker 1995: 31). From the process-oriented perspective, these three interdependent phases of formulation, implementation and representation meet with the three essential functions of the Commission presidency, namely agenda-setting leadership, mediative-institutional leadership, and public leadership (Tucker 1995: 18-19; see also

By filling a political purpose into a corresponding political agenda and concrete policies, the leader shows initiative and that he or she attends and responds to potential follower expectations. As “[p]olitical leaders cannot not interact”, a relationship will be initiated and resources mobilized which potentially provides a coordinated implementation and its later representation (Paige 1977: 98).

With the three phases of the process of leadership at hand, it is now necessary to recapture the three independent variables and to integrate both the functional phases and the independent variables, into one coherent scheme of analysis. As the interactionist approach postulates that all three variables are of the same importance in order to determine the leadership performance, it means that the three variables apply equally to all three phases of the leadership process. Consequently, the scheme of analysis includes nine different analytical units. However, while each phase also correlates with one particular leadership function, it can be assumed that the variables actually differ in their importance over the different phases.

As the demand for agenda-setting leadership corresponds with the phase of formulation, it can be presumed that in terms of political conceptualizations and initial policy design, personal predispositions, such as a leader’s political ambitions, the biographical background and pre-career steps, play a significant role in setting the agenda, in prioritizing topics and scope, as well as in the self-understanding of their office. Therefore, central attention needs to be placed on the personal predispositions.

The second phase of implementation refers to the demand of mediative-institutional leadership, and therefore specifically to the second variable, the institutional structure. In this phase, the abstract agenda is transformed into an operational reality involving institutional rules, institutional procedures and organizational resources. For the incumbent it means to influence, mediate among, and align with other actors in the institutional framework, while at same time exploiting the institutional structure and creating new institutional resources.

The third phase of representation conveys the third function, namely public leadership. To provide successful public leadership, it is important to have an ear on the actual political situation, societal demands and to assess correctly the public’s expectations towards the office. As such, the third variable, the situational setting, becomes particularly important. Owing to this correlation of phases and functions, the following table can be presented:

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12 Paige assumes a salience-initiative-interaction scheme as important characteristic features of political leadership, which is also similar to the formulation-implementation-representation scheme.
This model demonstrates that leadership performance is the result, on one hand, of the interaction of the three different independent leadership variables, and on the other, of the correlation of these variables with the three different functional phases of leadership. Although it is evident that the three variables are equally apparent in each phase, each section draws particular attention on one variable, namely formulation phase vs. personal predispositions, implementation phase vs. institutional structure, and representation phase vs. situational setting. The correlation of variables and functional phases can be regarded as an endless cyclic process in which the analytical time frame can reach from one day to an entire term in public office (Harrison 1995: 411). Moreover, in terms of political content the analytical focus may also range from a concrete policy proposal to the whole political agenda of one incumbent.

Although the process of leadership performance is in reality hardly “separable in the minds of leaders or in political practice generally”, meaning that the process is not only cyclic but that the functions may also take place at the same time, this theoretical separation enables the researcher to empirically analyze the political leadership performance of individual actors, and thus assess their actual impact and ‘concrete behavior’ in the political and policy process at the micro-meso level of analysis (Capano 2009: 14; Tucker 1995: 31; Chemers 1997: 163; Blondel 1987: 138). Therefore, this integrative model of variables and phases prepares the ground for a comprehensive and comparative analysis of political leadership performance by which leadership can be examined not only as a snapshot or outcome but as pictures in motion and thus as a process.
4 Political Leadership at the Supranational Level – Some Concluding Remarks

The European Union constitutes an “insecure” institutional-situational environment to provide political leadership. Whereas national executives of democratic countries can act in relatively stable institutional and situational contexts within democratically sanctioned hierarchies and with a clear separation of power and future goal orientation, the key actors in EU are bound to a system of (more or less) equally weighted European institutions with vague democratic legitimacy, no clear separation of powers, and without a shared plan for the future. Therefore, the Commission presidency is more exposed to an unpredictable and unreliable institutional-situational environment in terms of the utilization of formal authority and political determination than national heads of government and state.

However, the analysis of the leadership demands of the office, which are comparable to those of national public offices, as well as the brief examination of the performances of three Commission presidents have demonstrated that incumbents can and have to provide political leadership, even though the efforts and obstacles to exert such leadership at supranational level may appear more demanding and challenging when compared to the national level. Hence, a conceptualized weak office within the complex institutional framework of the European Union does not automatically imply weak leaders. It can nonetheless generate strong performing incumbents in the policy formulation process of the European Commission, and thus in the process of creating, mediating and representing EU policies.

In order to analyze the actual impact of these individual actors vis-à-vis the policy formulation process, the goal of the analytical model presented in this paper was to integrate and activate the multi-contextual nature of political leadership into one coherent framework in order to provide its systematic, holistic and comparative elaboration without compromising on its complexity. This model enables the researcher to explore the dynamics of leadership, in which the individual actor aims to succeed in creating and designing efficient and effective policies, and seeks to mediate them through the institutional system as well as represent them towards the broader public spheres or constituency. The paper thereby underscores the notion that leadership is not self-evident but that it derives from a reciprocal process between the leader and his/her institutional and situational environment, and that the leadership performance of the incumbent is the function of the causal relationships between the independent variables and the leadership demands that together constitute the political leadership performance.
Finally, the analysis of the office of the Commission presidency demonstrates that leadership does not only indicate the formal authority of an office, but that it entails a more relational and complex concept of political interaction. While political leadership does not automatically depend on the formal powers of a position, a weak office can even be more interesting for academic research on leadership performance, because headship and leadership can be more effectively distinguished from each other. Putting it more normatively, a formally weak office is hardly a prima facie excuse for politicians not to provide political leadership. It is thus essential to apply political leadership analysis at the supranational level and to examine systematically the performance of the Commission presidents and thus their impact on the policy making in supranational governance.

References


