Routledge Handbook of European Politics

José M. Magone

The development of political elites in Europe

Publication details


Luca Verzichelli, Maurizio Cotta

Published online on: 05 Jan 2015

How to cite:

Luca Verzichelli, Maurizio Cotta. 05 Jan 2015, The development of political elites in Europe from: Routledge Handbook of European Politics Routledge

Accessed on: 13 Jul 2021


PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Part IV

Political elites in European politics
The development of political elites in Europe

Luca Verzichelli and Maurizio Cotta

Political elites and long-term transformations in European politics

The history of European democracies is, to a large extent, a history of political elites. Between the last decades of the nineteenth century and World War I (WWI), when most of the European nation-states slowly began to experiment with pluralistic representation, the role played by political elites was crucial. According to Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto and Robert Michels – the three scholars generally associated with classic elite theory – the process of political modernization was accomplished thanks to the formation of stable groups of national political elites whose awareness and capabilities enabled them to unify pre-existing scattered groups of local notables, thus dramatically redefining the profiles and the mission of European ruling classes. As has been extensively debated (e.g. Parry 1969: Ch. 2), classic elite scholars focused their attention on the explanation of the ‘necessary gap’ between the minority of the population taking the important political decisions and the rest of the ruled subjects. Whereas Mosca and Pareto were somewhat vague about the democratic nature of this process, Michels (the first elite scholar to envisage the crucial role of political parties in the selection and articulation of political leadership) stressed the fact that democratization could restrain but not oppose oligarchic tendencies, conceiving the democratic process as a compromise between oligarchies.

Other criticisms of classic elite theory should be noted, particularly those based on well-known episodes of apology for or sympathy with the authoritarian drift emerging after WWI exhibited by some of scholars involved in the debate. This controversial historical episode makes the link between elite theory and democracy rather difficult to reconstruct, but the impact of this school on the evolution of democratic theory (as evidenced by the interpretations of seminal American democratic thinkers, from Harold D. Lasswell to James Burnham and the neo-elitist scholars of the late twentieth century) is undeniable.

The foremost contribution of the first elite theory was to highlight the development of a cohesive group of political rulers as a fundamental factor in the emergence of a strong political community. According to this theory, the era of the first wave of democratization resulted in the creation of a strong link between a unified elite and the national community (Higley and Gunther 1992; Dogan and Higley 1998), a complex and not necessarily linear process whose timing and cost varied among European countries. Max Weber, who wrote his most important
works at the end of this extraordinary period of change, noted that the differences in the performances of European states were mainly due to the different capabilities and degrees of responsibility of their political elites. The synthetic ‘implicit comparison’ at the core of *Politics as a Vocation* – a crucial step in the articulation of the modern sociology of political elites – is primarily devoted to a description of the problems experienced by the German state in forming a political elite capable of preserving its unity and governing the processes of political change in the rational way that should characterize modern polities. The key qualities of politicians, according to Weber, are ‘passion, a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion’ (Weber 1946 [1919]: 115).

The reality of European politics extended beyond the Weberian vision of the professional political elite, as the pace of the social and political transformations changing the relationship between ruling and ruled classes was much faster than Max Weber could have expected. However, the fundamental role of mass parties (in totalitarian and democratic versions) in producing strong political leaderships recruited from within (and legitimated by) a broader circle of professional politicians has probably been the most remarkable and widespread phenomenon of the twentieth century in Europe, whereby different types of organized parties (Duverger 1951) have produced influential and durable groups of leaders. The multi-dimensional composition of modern political elites foreseen by Weberian democratic elitism has recently been reassessed by Ian Pakulski (2012). The ‘quadrangle of power’, delimited by party-state leaders (often charismatic or populist), professional parliamentary politicians, top governmental bureaucrats and the expanding party officialdom, represents the ideal space in which different types of rulers can sustain one another and simultaneously limit one another, playing variable roles that depend on the nature of their linkages to the political community. In this perspective, the main differences across the geographical regions Weber had observed in his implicit large-scale comparison were already clear in his time: while in North America a leader-centred form of democratic polity was emerging, the primary feature of European nascent democracies seemed to be the party-centred nature of their elites. However, Weber could not foresee the different outcomes of the processes he had envisaged, the degree of variability in the transformation of democratic elites or the breakdown of some of the European pluralist polities (including his own Germany).

An exploration of the empirical analysis of the links between elite transformations and the development of European democracies would not be complete without reference to more recent contributions from political science, especially the works of Robert Dahl and Stein Rokkan. Indeed, it was Dahl (1970) who provided the first comprehensive study of the various modes of accomplishment of a sufficient ‘democratic standard’ (which he referred to as ‘polyarchy’), highlighting different potential combinations in the extension of political and civil rights. The variable paths to polyarchy, dependent upon the trajectories of liberalization and political participation, could explain variations in the ‘sensibilities’ of the core elites, with consequently different outcomes in the processes of democratization and in elite–mass relationships.

During the same period, another master of modern comparative politics, Stein Rokkan, was producing his extraordinary historical map of the development of European democracies (Rokkan 1970). Focusing on the achievement of the required standards of liberalization, participation, parliamentary control and proportional representation (the ‘Rokkanian thresholds’), he proposed to demonstrate that the differences in timing between countries in the passing of these thresholds had crucially contributed to shaping the rather divergent resulting political configurations within the context of an otherwise similar process of democratization across the European continent. Once again, the role of political elites in finding a viable solution and planning their specific version of liberalization, as well as adopting a more or less proportional system of parliamentary representation, was evident in the national effort
to create a ‘model of democracy’ that would be suitable for the culture and the nature of a given political system.

The impact of political elites on the process of democratization is therefore evident; however, we must also pay attention to the impact that different institutional arrangements have had in determining the subsequent transformations of European political elites. This link, extensively studied by political scientists, will be the focus of the next section, in which we review the main transformations of the European political elites occurring after WWII, during the period of full democratization. A brief review of the various interpretations offered by the literature on the long-term transformations of political elites in Europe, with an assessment of the main theoretical implications of this phenomenon, will follow. Our discussion on the similarities and dissimilarities of European political elites will conclude with the introduction of fundamental intervening variables, such as the breakdown of Communism and the political reunification of Europe; a detailed analysis of the consequences of these phenomena is covered in Chapter 25. The final section of our chapter will then illustrate another fundamental historical process that has recently emerged as a fascinating challenge for European elites: their convergence within a common political space and within the shared institutional setting of the supranational European Union governance.

**Measures of elite convergence in Europe**

What general trends of transformation have characterized the consolidation of democratic political elites in Europe during the twentieth century? And what is the state of European political elites after the decisive waves of democratization – the first following WWII and the second during the 1970s – that completed the re-democratization of Western Europe, removing the totalitarian regimes established in the inter-war period? Looking to the general profile of the ruling class, the evidence emerging from recent comparative studies confirms two traditional characteristics of political elites from around the world (Blondel and Mueller Rommel 2007): first, elites, as primarily male, relatively well-educated and relatively rich citizens, do not symmetrically represent the social composition of their represented universes; second, they tend to be self-interested and generally oppose any new challenger, selecting the most powerful political leader from among themselves. For the radical supporters of direct and participatory democracy, these characteristics have often been cited as indicating the structural limits of a purely elitist view of representative democracy; some of these criticisms have recently re-emerged with the new populist claims following the process of de-ideologization and the decline of mass parties (Meny and Surel 2002). However, if we examine the development of political elites in Europe over recent decades, it can be argued that the distance between representative elites and ordinary citizens is not completely crystallized, and that a number of attempts have been made to bridge this gap. For example, we should recall the slow but continuous increase in female representation at the parliamentary level (especially in Northern Europe), the debate over institutional devices intended to increase social representation (for instance the quota system for female representatives) and the introduction of specific procedures fostering transparency and participation in order to build new bridges between representative institutions and citizens (Leston Bandeira 2012). More recently, political parties have also attempted to resolve the problem of the low degree of intra-party democracy, experimenting with various modes of involvement for activists and sympathizers, both in the discussion of political purposes and in the selection of their leaders.

In fact, European democracies have been quite sensitive to the democratic deficit problem presented by the political elite. The most relevant unresolved question – the Achilles’ heel of
current democratic regimes – concerns the very core of representative democracy: political elites. Political elites (in particular, professional politicians sitting in representative assemblies) across Europe are the principal target of repeated waves of mistrust and disenchantment, albeit with magnitudes varying from one country to another. The institutions least trusted in public opinion are those in which the centrality of professionalized political elites is most evident. Recalling Churchill’s paradoxical view of democracy as ‘the worst form of government except for all the others that have been tried’, can we consider the persistence of a caste of politicians to be the price that must be paid to keep the democratic order alive in Europe?

However, a closer examination of long-term biographical and attitudinal data concerning European political elites shows that relevant changes have occurred over time: European political elites have been significantly transformed in response to a long series of challenges and crises. Some of these responses are similar across countries, while country-specific factors have motivated certain deviations that are peculiar to one polity or another. In this respect, we propose to first investigate the main similarities in the profile of political elites and then to analyse the most relevant dissimilarities emerging across countries and across party families.

The paths of professionalization of European political elites have fundamentally confirmed the predictions made by scholars of the elite theory and particularly by Max Weber: political parties have been the uncontested protagonists of this historical phase, with their officialdoms progressively replacing the ‘notables’ who had populated parliamentary institutions until the first decades of the twentieth century. The declining ranks of noblemen and lawyers (see Figures 24.1 and 24.2), balanced out by the increasing number of full-time paid politicians and union

![Figure 24.1 Distribution of percentage of nobility among European parliamentary elites in 12 countries (1850–2000)](image)

Source: EurElite Cube File (1848–2000), compiled by authors.

Note: For this and all subsequent figures: countries included in the file are Denmark, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Austria, Portugal, Finland and Hungary.
The development of political elites

functionaries (see Figure 24.3), illustrate this process of replacement, which did not exhibit a high degree of variance across countries, as the analysis of the standard deviations of our aggregate data clearly indicates.

These figures provide a simplified but vivid representation of the path of historical convergence among European parliamentary elites; in most studies, this has been considered the best proxy for a broader process of homogenization among European political elites. However, thanks to recent research, we now have a fairly accurate picture of this important process of change. These recent studies have shown that political professionalization has in fact been a multi-dimensional and ‘never-ending’ process that must therefore be disentangled in a number of different explananda and analysed by employing a variety of data types and techniques. According to a recent collective study (Cotta and Best 2007), three main historical phases can be extrapolated from the last 150 years of historical transformations among European parliamentary representatives.

1 First democratization and consolidation of a pluralistic political elite: on average, we can locate this phase between the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the end of WWI. During this period, the previously dominant political role of the European upper classes within the representative institutions was challenged and reduced but not completely erased. This situation produced composite and somewhat fragmented national political elites – the German and the Italian cases being two paradigmatic examples of the lack of an ‘elite settlement’ – primarily composed of well-educated ‘liberal’ representatives. The strong presence of senior civil servants and a still remarkable number of noblemen were among the most frequently observed characteristics of parliamentary elites in many European countries.

Figure 24.2 Distribution of percentage of lawyers among European parliamentary elites in 12 countries (1850–2000)
Source: EurElite Cube File (1848–2000), compiled by authors.
Breakthrough and ascendance of the new mass parties (from the end of WWI to the 1960s): the emergence of professional politicians and a more representative reflection of social stratification within parliaments are the most important features of this period; they coincide with the rise and success of new families of parties, namely the Socialist/social-democratic and the Christian-democratic families. The authoritarian and totalitarian regimes that were established in Europe during the inter-war period also promoted their own special type of party-centred political class; however, in these cases the inextricable association of party and state and the organization of the ‘single-party’ pyramid based on the notion of ‘militia’ rather than the traditional ‘territorial unit’ (Duverger 1951) produced a fairly distinctive type of professional politician.

Mature democracy, marked by the decline of traditional mass parties: only 20–30 years after WWII, European polities looked significantly different than they had in the early years of ‘reconstruction’. This astonishing process of modernization was largely due to an accelerated rate of growth, but also to the transformation of the role of political parties: the third quarter of the twentieth century had been characterized by a further expansion of mass party organizations, but during the following period these structures generally lost ground in terms of their memberships and reduced their activities, but not the size of their professionalized elites. These elites have been able to stay in politics thanks to the generous systems of European public financing that have moulded the new model of the ‘cartel party’ (Katz and Mair 1995).

Within this general picture of convergence and ‘contagion effects’, the development of political elites in Europe also exhibits a number of significant dissimilarities, both across countries and
The development of political elites

across different parties and party families. In order to provide a synthetic account of the most important lines of variation, we concentrate our attention upon three aspects that have been highlighted by the comparative literature: differences in the forms of political professionalism, dissimilar patterns of elite circulation and career paths and, finally, the distinctiveness of political elites vis-à-vis other relevant elite groups (i.e. economic elites, social elites, media elites, etc.).

With regard to the first aspect, it can be noted that the evolution of political professionalism has resulted in significantly different outcomes during the age of consolidated democracy. In his classic work on democratic legislatures, Jean Blondel (1963) observed that the profiles of representatives vary considerably on the basis of institutional and contextual variables, for example electoral regimes and the salience of the position of MPs within the constitutional framework. By analysing the impact of the different opportunity structures in political recruitment, a significant degree of variance among parliamentarians can be identified (both within the broader world of democracies and also in the narrower European landscape) in terms of political experience, party identification and social and political profiles (Norris 1997). When cultural variables are added to institutional factors in the explanation of historical change and cross-country variation, the challenges for the researcher increase even further. If we take, for instance, the rate of female representation in European parliaments (see Figure 24.4), we find both a common trend (an increase in the proportion of women in European parliaments) and some important cross-country variations in the timing and rate of growth of this process. The process of including women within representative elites started late (in some countries significantly later than in others), and it has faced much greater opposition in certain countries, as the high rate of deviation clearly shows. In attempting to explain these variations, we are still unable to make a definitive statement about the roles of cultural factors, specific ideologies, ‘contagion effects’ linked to the dynamics

Figure 24.4 Distribution of percentage of female MPs among European parliamentary elites in 12 countries (1850–2000)

Source: EurElite Cube File (1848–2000), compiled by authors.
of political competition, or country-specific or institutional variables in facilitating (or hindering) increased female recruitment (Matland and Studlar 1996; Christmas-Best and Kjaer 2007).

A mix of domestic and exogenous factors affects other aspects of the profile of various European political elites, such as their territorial links. In this field of study, the distinction often taken for granted between ‘European’ parliamentarians and US congressmen does not completely survive an empirical test; in fact, researchers have determined that US congressmen can be rather similar in many respects to some European parliamentarians (Borchert and Zeiss 2003), and that a variable distribution of relatively autonomous ‘entrepreneurs’ and more disciplined ‘back-benchers’ can easily be found by scrutinizing the different European cases. Even more evident is the multi-dimensional explanation of the recruitment of full-time paid (party) politicians in a long-term perspective: although there was a general increase (during the age of mass parties) and a subsequent decrease (during the last decades of the twentieth century), a diachronic cross-country analysis of this phenomenon shows a number of interesting differences (Fiers and Secker 2007: 142), due to a mix of specific national settings, characteristics of parties (or party families) and processes of party institutionalization.

With regard to the second aspect introduced above – the changing patterns of elite circulation and career paths – a systematic analysis of the data on historical profiles of parliamentary elites in Europe (for instance Cotta and Verzichelli 2007: 421) confirms that a significant relationship exists between institutional change and the transformation of patterns of elite recruitment and careers. However, this relationship is not linear: the historical role of political parties as intermediary actors of representation and especially the influence of the organized mass party of the ‘class’ type seem strong enough to validate Weber’s hypotheses. It should be noted, though, that these variables do not have the same impact across all countries, essentially because the success and the density of such party organizations have not been identical across the continent. Moreover, the continuity or discontinuity of a democratic regime clearly has a considerable impact on the long-term consolidation of political recruitment and political careers. Countries enjoying a continuous institutional development tend to experience more incremental transformations in their parliamentary elites; in contrast, abrupt interruptions in the democratic experience have entailed a significant amount of instability in the elite profiles of some European countries.

Another particularly important aspect in most of the European democracies with a parliamentary system of government concerns the different forms of ministerial selection and de-selection and the relationship between ministers and the pool of parliamentarians. More than 20 years ago, the studies included in Blondel and Thiebault (1991) offered evidence in support of the idea that there was substantial homogeneity among European government ministers in terms of parliamentary and party background. However, some interesting long-term variations were also noted that could be explained in terms of country-specific factors – for instance, top politicians from ‘consensus democracy’ coalition governments were more likely to have a relatively unstable ministerial career, and ‘majoritarian’ democracies were more likely to have an ‘expertise-based’ system of ministerial recruitment. Today, although these long-term trends do not seem to have dramatically changed, new research avenues have been opened, searching for (among other things) explanations of other irregular phenomena such as ministerial reshuffles and the presence of technocratic and non-partisan ministers within the executive branch (Dowding and Dumont 2009).

The distinctiveness of the political elite from the rest of the ‘ruling class’ is another fascinating topic that captured the interest of social scientists during the phase of democratic consolidation in the second half of the twentieth century. The ‘power elite’ studies produced by the supporters of the neo-elitist theory in North America and later widely replicated in Europe (with the
extensive use of surveys) stressed a rather mutable set of tendencies among politicians with regard to collaboration and/or integration with other elite groups. A relevant point of reference remains the work of Robert Putnam (1976), which was preceded by an intensive comparison between two very different types of European political elites (British and Italian; Putnam 1973) that showed a fluctuating range of attitudes on the part of politicians toward the administrative elite and the rest of the political system.

New challenges for the ‘old’ European political elites

After WWII, while the European democratic regimes, stabilized by a fairly homogeneous framework of plural demands articulated by catch-all-parties and ruled by professional representatives increasingly resembling ambitious career politicians (King 1981: 279), became consolidated, the pluralist societies of Europe were changing at a rapid pace. This rapid evolution is probably largely responsible for the dissatisfaction of citizens in democratic polities with their representatives; at times, these citizens may be tempted by alternative or complementary forms of democracy or even by spontaneous and non-institutional forms of expression. The current problems of democratic representation seem to be strongly connected to the asymmetric development between political elites and political communities. Indeed, the development of democratization has meant that representatives have increasingly become, via a profound process of professionalization, a true ‘political class’ separate from society; this has inevitably increased the distance between citizens and elites, opening a broad space for mistrust (Dogan 2005).

What are the main challenges for the political class after the consolidation of democratic order during the second half of the twentieth century? We will propose just a rough outline here, as the overall change in political elites cannot be analysed without taking into consideration two crucial phenomena of recent decades: the breakdown of Communist regimes and the epic enlargement of the European Union to include a number of Central and Eastern European countries. Even without specifically discussing these phenomena (see Chapter 25), we can highlight the factors that had an impact upon the long-term transformation of political elites during the pre-1989 order. These effects were then combined with the more impressive and immediate consequences of the revolutionary events that began with the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The rise of post-materialism must surely be considered a potentially relevant factor of change for the established relationship between political elites and their followers. The infiltration of post-materialist values into Western societies (Inglehart 1971) and the demands for wider participation in critical decisions and for more open circulation between elites groups represented a challenge to the traditional political elites. The immediate outcomes in terms of the transformation of the representative political class were perhaps not so impressive, since not all the new left and Green parties that had expressed some of these new demands were able to find a sufficient representative space within their political systems, but the innovative aspects of their parliamentary delegations – in terms of both social backgrounds and political experience – were undeniable (Tronconi and Verzichelli 2007).

A second element of tension arising during the last decades of the twentieth century can be found in the attenuation of some of the traditional features of political professionalism in conjunction with the organizational and financial crisis experienced by traditional mass parties (Mair et al. 2012). The so-called ‘cartelization’ of political parties has unquestionably balanced out the decrease in the ‘bottom-up’ flow of resources coming from party members and activists, providing other means for sustaining large groups of professional politicians, but it has also profoundly changed the nature of their professionalism; this political class has become almost entirely dependent on the public financing of political actors and the availability of public offices.
Luca Verzichelli and Maurizio Cotta

The inversion of the trend in the recruitment of parliamentarians who are already employed as full-time paid politicians (see Figure 24.3) is a clear indicator of this tendency.

A third factor of change that should be mentioned here concerns the decline of the ‘nation-state’ as a central (if not the unique) arena for the political class. The immediate post-war phase was dominated by important issues of economic reconstruction and international security, which helped national leaders to ensure their monopoly of the political space. Political parties – especially those with governmental responsibilities – belonged to a narrow core of ‘party families’ with fairly similar patterns of elite selection and circulation. At the same time, the guidance of the process of European integration functioned according to a typical intergovernmental framework, thus stressing the roles of a few domestic leaders belonging to the same political cultures. With the passing of time, this simplified scenario has been replaced by a more complex structure of values and opportunities: in many European countries, and particularly in the largest ones, demands from ethno-regionalist parties have grown, and processes of political devolution have been implemented even where the notion of the unitary state seemed to be indisputable (for instance in Italy during the 1970s, in France during the 1980s and more recently in the UK). The results of this slow process of ‘hollowing out’ the state in terms of political and electoral behaviour are quite well known (De Winter and Tursan 1998), but their interesting consequences for the processes of legitimation, circulation and the structure of the European ruling classes have only more recently been observed. A recent assessment conducted by Borchert (2012) has highlighted the extent to which territorially integrated political careers and different kinds of political ambitions have become increasingly relevant in the European landscape, as politicians now have the additional opportunity to ‘move through the labyrinth’ of a multi-level polity. This also applies to certain extra-European federal systems, such as the US, Australia and Canada.

Within the more restricted landscape of the European Union, the progressive consolidation of the role of supranational institutions has added another relevant level for political opportunities. A new destination – namely, a well-paid seat in a reputable institution at the supranational level – has been added to the ideal ‘target list’ of our ambitious professional politicians. However, career politicians do not necessarily seek a specialist role within the EU institutional system; instead, they can use the EU institutions as a stepping stone for further ‘domestic’ political commitments, thus choosing a somewhat innovative ‘bidirectional’ political career path. In any event, the overall number of national politicians who spontaneously opt for a supranational career is limited (Hubé and Verzichelli 2012), as is the number of European Parliament representatives who ‘go native’ as Europeans, ‘changing their mind’ during their mandate and becoming fully socialized as authentic representatives in a supranational political order (Scully 2005).

Finally, we should mention another relevant challenge for the European political elites that stems from the increased space acquired (especially within the executive branch of government) by new modes of technocratic expertise. The introduction of outsider ‘experts’ in specific positions, in particular as finance ministers or ministers for administrative reforms, is not actually a recent development: after the fiscal crisis of the early 1990s, several technocrats were recruited to fill positions in European governments in order to cope with the emerging problems. Today, a similar tendency seems to be on the rise, especially where the normal patterns of policy-making have proven to be incapable of tackling the challenges of the economic and financial crises. For example, the number of technocratic ministers in Portugal and Italy has clearly increased over the past few decades (Costa Pinto and Tavares de Almeida 2009; Verzichelli 2009), but even the emblematic case of ‘parliamentary selection’ in Westminster has recently exhibited some similar tendencies (Yong and Hazell 2011).
The relevance of elite transformations in the study of European politics

Thus far, we have briefly reviewed some of the main branches of comparative literature addressing the long-term transformations of European political elites, devoting particular attention to the social composition of these elites and their patterns of political recruitment. It should be noted that elite scholars have also stressed the importance of elite transformations as an independent variable that can be used to interpret certain crucial phenomena of European politics. We could cite, for instance, the attempts to explain the diachronic transformations of a given political system based on the pace of modernization of its political elite (see, e.g., Best 1982 for an analysis of the German case).

More generally speaking, following the Rokkanian approach, the use of long-term transformation of elites as a critical variable in explaining changes within the European scenario has been evident in a number of comparative studies, from the first influential analyses of welfare state transformation (Flora and Heidenheimer 1981) to the reconstruction of the leftist mobilization in Europe (Bartolini 2007). More recently, the remarkable progress in the field of comparative politics has included investigation of the impact of gender representation upon policy-making and democratic quality in Europe (Mateo Diaz 2005). These studies have paved the way for a number of relevant comparative projects focusing on European political changes, more or less connected to the discussion of the transformation of political elites. However, their focal points are significantly distant from our interests here, and they are addressed in other chapters of this volume. Therefore, we will limit our survey to the discussion of studies on the linkages between elite attributes and the performance of democratic governance. In this respect, there are two fields of study that have been particularly relevant over recent decades. The first concerns the development of certain typologies of democratic regimes and the subsequent discussion of the appropriateness of various democratic models. The second field includes studies on the role of elites in improving the quality of democracy.

In the first direction, Arendt Lijphart’s lifelong reflection on patterns of democracies (see Lijphart 2012) deserves a special mention. European political systems, while similar in many respects, exhibit a good deal of variance along the conceptual space defined by the two polar types of democratic governance developed by the Dutch-American scholar: Westminster and consensus democracies. Lijphart began by reflecting on one of these types – so-called (at that time) ‘consociational’ democracy – focusing on the past role of social and political elites in the Netherlands (Lijphart 1969, 1977). According to Lijphart, the politics of accommodation typical of this country (and of pluralistic/power-sharing democracies in general) should be seen as a consequence of the ability of segmented and non-territorially defined elites to effectively cooperate, bridging societal cleavages and ensuring the quality of the country’s (consensus) democracy. Broad coalitions, the mutual recognition of veto powers, the proportionality rule and the segmental autonomy of the different cultures were the crucial instruments used by these elites to settle old historical conflicts and keep democracy functioning.

In a broader perspective, departing from a reappraisal of the classic elite paradigm, the consequences of elite settlements and elite convergence for democratic consolidation in Europe and elsewhere have been extensively researched by Higley and his associates (for a recent comprehensive analysis, see Higley and Burton 2006). In particular, these studies have stressed the importance (and the difficulties) of achieving a pluralistic and consensual unity among elite groups.

At the same time, the study of the variable institutional settings of European democracies has revealed an increasingly troublesome problem for the incumbent ruling classes: how can
they cope with the growing demand for institutional reforms and with priorities that are not easily acceptable to traditional professional politicians? It is no surprise that these elites have increasingly come under attack in many democratic countries (see, for instance, Borchert and Zeiss 2003). This question is also relevant for the comparative scholars involved in the analysis of another crucial issue: the study of the quality of democracy (Diamond and Morlino 2005). As highlighted by Morlino (2012), the analysis of the role of elites is a fundamental aspect for both the empirical measurement and the theoretical assessment of democratic quality. Whichever approach we decide to follow – from the ‘classic’ long-term analysis of democratic dynamics to the analysis of survey data on ‘democratic auditing’, or even elaboration of some of the long-term patterns in democratic performance observable in the extensive databases available (for example Polity IV, Freedom House or the recent Bertelsmann indexes) – we will have to deal with the crucial question of the elite role in the enforcement of key democratic qualities.

Can the ‘need for improved elite capabilities’ that has repeatedly emerged from criticisms of European democracies be satisfied by the traditional methods of elite selection and circulation? At least three indicators currently under investigation by scholars may provide some empirical evidence in response to this question. The increasingly problematic legitimacy of political leaders appointed in elitist contexts (such as traditional party organizations) is the first. The calls for intra-party democracy have clearly grown louder over the past decades, and in some cases successful alternative methods of leadership selection have been developed (Hazan and Rahat 2010; Cross and Blais 2012). However, the adaptation of party structures in Europe (and particularly in some former mass parties from the popular and social-democratic traditions) appears to be more problematic and time-consuming in the European scenario, where the consequences of the personalization of politics (Blondel and Thiebault 2009) for the structure of political elites have yet to be carefully analysed.

The second indicator is the strong new wave of demands for accelerated elite turnover, the best proxy of which is probably the average percentage of newcomers in the European parliaments. It is true that values for this indicator have remained on average under the threshold of 40 per cent newcomers at each election (which we may consider to be the cut-off point between a normal and a critical election), but the trend over recent decades shows a slow but steady increase, resulting in an additional decrease in the number of senior members within European parliaments (see Figure 24.5).

Finally, one should keep in mind the impressive data from all across Europe (although with remarkable variance between countries) indicating the declining rate of trust in the political elites (von Beyme 2000; Dogan 2005). The significant divide between the caste of politicians and civil society has been an issue at least since the early 1990s, when the massive mani pulite (‘clean hands’) scandal underscored the crisis in the traditional Italian party system; other European democracies also suffered less intrusive but significant problems due to the unnecessary privileges of political elites. The extent of this problem within the classic European party democracies is still obvious, and it will probably remain a priority, barring significant rearrangements of party organizations and new sets of rules concerning public financing and ethical issues in politics (Katz 2011).

The implications suggested by the different but complementary approaches to the study of the linkage between elites and democracies in Europe are highly diverse, and we certainly cannot summarize them in this limited space. However, even such a short review should be sufficient to support the argument that the problems of elite convergence and stability (and, more generally, the question of democratic accountability that can only be resolved by a reduction in the gap between elites and public opinion) are more apparent now than they were during the era of democratic consolidation. This explains the recent upsurge in various biographical and
behavioural studies of European political elites, which will be reviewed in Chapters 25 and 26. In the next section, we will concentrate our analysis on a more focused question: the role of political elites in the development of a supranational dimension of politics, and the consequent emergence of a European institutional scenario as a crucial arena for the adaptation of domestic political actors.

**Europe of elites: elite transformation as a motivator for European integration**

In the introductory section of this essay, we mentioned the importance of the process of elite convergence as the basis for European economic and political integration. In this specific regard, a large body of literature can be cited, ranging from the dispute between competing integration theories to the recent debate on the concept of multilevel governance. We cannot develop a systematic review here, as it would necessarily be superficial, but we can briefly recall some recent contributions that have confirmed the delicate and fundamental role of elites (among others) in the evolution of an ‘ever-closer Europe’. Building on a broad empirical knowledge about the current supranational entity, Hooghe and Marks have recently (2009) focalized the impact of elites on the process of European integration in a rather pragmatic way: elites have been and still are important (which is absolutely consistent with all the grand theories of integration), but their autonomy in shaping supranational governance depends on the degree of permissiveness allowed by European national populations. According to Hooghe and Marks (2009), ‘permissive consensus’ would therefore have been the predominant attitude in public
opinion in Western European countries during the second half of the twentieth century, especially in those countries where the goal of European integration functioned as a driver for modernization and political rehabilitation and recovery. With the passing of time, and with the emergence of various problems for the political equilibrium and the financial sustainability of the project, due to both deepening and widening processes within the EC/EU, the permissive consensus has been partially replaced by a kind of ‘constraining dissensus’. The European elites must therefore deal with a much more heterogeneous mix of feelings and attitudes, which they tend to represent in different ways. This has paved the way for a number of evident transformations, which now constitute some of the most relevant puzzles for students of European politics. Among them, we should emphasize the following:

1. the increasing degree of Euroscepticism within the political elites;
2. the problematic persistence at the supranational level of a mainstream party system based on the traditional party families, challenged by the emergence of new forms of national populism and by new clusters of parties that appear to be less loyal to the perspective of integration;
3. the limited cultural preparation of European policy-makers to deal with issues related to the problems of international and global governance;
4. the limited capability of the elites representing the European ‘people’ within the communitarian institutions to impose and maintain themselves as an autonomous ruling class at the supranational level.

These problematic issues do not mean that we are witnessing the end of a historical perspective of elite convergence as a motivator of closer integration. Furthermore, we should certainly not stop regarding the perspective of future integration as an elite project, as it always has been in the past (Haller 2008). However, the number of constraints that need to be taken into account in disentangling the complex phenomenon of the relationship between elite transformations and European integration has clearly increased.

The crucial aspect that lies at the very root of the problems enumerated above is that the convergence of the European domestic elites has not provided the necessary conditions for the stability of a prospective European elite. In other words, the processes of selection and recruitment for all the European policy-makers are still largely organized at the ‘domestic level’, using national pools of aspirants, national selectorates, and national rules and procedures. This fundamental aspect, which makes the evolving European polity particularly weak in a comparative perspective (Cotta 2012), is evident when we look at the central policy-makers in the inner circle of the political elite – from the members of the Commission to the members of the European Parliament – but also when we examine the number of high representatives, diplomats and experts who populate the complex system of the EU’s ‘comitology’.

Over the past few decades, a number of studies have addressed the problematic relationship between domestic political elites and the complexity of supranational governance in the European Union. Some of these have explored the distance between national and supranational representatives, confirming the impression of a multifaceted and fragmented situation: studies from a project on European representatives conducted during the years of the adoption of the single currency (see Katz and Wessels 1999) produced some cautious but optimistic evidence regarding the chances of the emergence of a new and identifiable European parliamentary elite. However, the same studies also clarified that the path towards a genuine process of convergence of all the domestic elites from the member states to a common pattern of elite values and attitudes would be more complicated than what had been observed at the national level one century before.
A recent attempt at a comprehensive analysis of this complexity comes from a broad survey covering a large sample of European national politicians in the context of the IntUne project (Best et al. 2012). In this study, the attitudes of domestic politicians towards the future perspective of the European Union were extensively analysed on the basis of a broad and multidimensional concept of Europeanness that encompasses both the classic ‘pro-Europeanist’ attitudes (trust in EU institutions, favourable vision of closer and deeper integration, etc.) and other cognitive and emotive attitudes of belongingness and attachment to a supranational entity. Once again, the compound nature of the elite vision emerges from the data: in addition to certain expected findings (such as the confirmation of a more pronounced anti-Europeanism among the representatives of non-core European party families and within some newer and more sceptical member states), interesting evidence of a changing situation was also observed. Indeed, the distribution of the preferences and attitudes of European politicians delineates a number of ideal clusters, some of which exhibit a good deal of cross-national convergence, from a more typical federal model to a clearly anti-Europeanist model, with some compound models in between (Cotta and Russo 2012).

Conclusions: the European political elite in times of crisis

The emergence of a profound economic crisis that has been particularly problematic for European countries and within the Eurozone (Cotta 2012) has triggered a debate over the adequacy of the current European political elites. As described in other chapters of this volume, most of the above-mentioned indicators of a state of sickness within the traditional European elites have been more and more marked during recent years. In a very roughly outlined list of troubles, the following should be emphasized:

- the frequent occurrence of critical elections (both in terms of strong electoral de-alignments and low electoral turnout);
- a new resurgence of mistrust of political elites and institutions;
- the increasing number of technocratic actors replacing political leaders within core executive roles;
- the dissolution of many party systems in Europe and the persistent incapability of the heirs of the traditional mass party organizations to establish new credible and stable leadership capable of bridging the gap between political elites and the public.

All of these issues seem particularly complex and critical, although the magnitude of their effects obviously varies from one country to another. For instance, in the Southern political systems that have been especially penalized by the crisis, the emergence of the technocratic challenge has represented a threat to the survival of the traditional ruling class: are the technocrats complementary actors or real competitors for the existing political elites? However, in principle this problem is applicable to a number of European countries, since the European ‘central’ bureaucratic elites who play a crucial role in ensuring the implementation of many political decisions are in fact technocratic; sooner or later, these actors could come into conflict with the domestic political elites, who seem particularly reluctant to renounce their autonomy.

Overall, the perspective for political elites within the context of European democracies in the twenty-first century looks particularly interesting, but also incredibly complicated. The political developments of the past two decades seem to have introduced a number of intervening variables and additional obstacles to the stable and productive process of settlement.
Bibliography


The development of political elites


Luca Verzichelli and Maurizio Cotta
