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The development of parliamentary representation in post-1990 Europe

Heinrich Best and Elena Semenova

The following chapter takes a synoptic look at the changes in the recruitment and careers of national political elites in Europe since 1990. In the context of The Routledge Handbook of European Politics, this focus on the national elite level is justified by the contractual nature of the European Union. National parliaments and governments still play a pivotal role in the ongoing process of European integration, which is fundamentally a ‘sequel and system of treaties’ (Best et al. 2012: 3). They also have the ultimate say with regard to who occupies top positions in EU institutions. The national level serves as the springboard for the careers of supranational elites in the multilevel system of European governance (Verzichelli and Edinger 2005). On the other hand, if European integration can be conceptualized as an elite process (Haller 2008), this raises the question of whether the structures of national political elites in different European countries are compatible, and to what extent the trajectories of their evolution are convergent or at least synchronized. The assumption here is that the process of institutional integration is fostered by the structural assimilation of national political elites; profound structural differences between European political elites would thus represent an impediment to European integration.

The chapter starts with an outline of the trajectories and dynamics of structural change in West European representative elites since the end of the Second World War. We will show that, although significant differences remain, the dynamics of change have been guided by synchronizing influences. In the period between the 1940s and 1990, a consensus challenge shaped the development of West European representative elites. Following the elimination of the ‘communist threat’, a legitimacy challenge has directed the evolution of West European representative elites over recent decades. In Central and Eastern Europe, post-1989 changes have been shaped by the challenges resulting from the turmoil of transition, the needs of democratic consolidation and the countries’ adaptation to the Western model of representative democracy. Finally, we will discuss whether a common European type of representative elites has emerged from these developments.
Patterns of parliamentary representation in Western Europe since the 1940s

Even when we apply the most general form of the concept of democratization to post-Second World War Western Europe, the results are seemingly contradictory.

Although West European parliaments have long since ceased to be exclusive clubs for the wealthy and high born, with women increasingly finding their way into national assemblies (see Figure 25.1), other barriers have arisen to replace those of class and gender. These new barriers and filters no longer translate the status hierarchies and value systems prevalent in society at large into modes of recruitment; they are now located within the narrower realm of political systems (Cotta and Best 2000: 493–526). The gradual exclusion from the ranks of MPs of those with a background in productive or distributive economic activities (such as workers and agriculturists), the corresponding increase in the number of public servants and officials from pressure group organizations and parties, the growing accumulation (sequential and simultaneous) of local and regional offices, and the increasing embedding of contenders within the upper ranks of party hierarchies all point in this direction. The elimination of formal barriers of access to European parliaments has thus been counteracted by the establishment of an informal insider–outsider differential, firmly guarded and perpetuated by selectorates and party organizations. Those who are available (in terms of their time constraints and the security of their jobs) for elective public office, who have qualifications and skills deemed useful for a political career (preferably certified by an academic degree of some kind) and who are willing and able to implant themselves in local or party offices have stood a greater chance of penetrating the filters and overcoming the barriers blocking the way to a parliamentary seat (see Figure 25.2).

![Figure 25.1 Female legislators in European parliaments (1946–2012)](image)

Source: West European DataCube, East European DataCube, authors’ calculations.
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Figure 25.2 Legislators with a university degree in European parliaments (1946–2009)
Source: West European DataCube, East European DataCube, authors’ calculations.

The public service has become the primary societal sector for parliamentary recruitment. This development could be linked to the main challenge West European polities faced in the bipolar global situation after the Second World War: namely, the establishment of consensually unified polities and societies as a primary condition for the containment of communism. The mediation of conflicts and the integration of society were the order of the day, and corporate interest mediation and particularly the extension of welfare state benefits were the most important consensus-creating policies. The consensus challenge was reflected in parliamentary recruitment, with redistribution specialists (predominantly found in the public sector) prevailing during this period (Best 2003; Figure 25.3).

However, the single most important factor that synchronized the development of post-Second World War West European democracies – the communist challenge – suddenly disappeared between 1989 and 1990. According to the law of challenge and response, one would expect that this disappearance of the communist threat would result in a change in legislative recruitment and career patterns. In particular, this change would be expected to affect legislative recruitment from the public sector, which was the pivotal consensus-fostering element in the representative elites of Western Europe after the Second World War. Our data confirm this expectation. The time series for public sector representation in West European parliaments reached a turning point at the end of the Cold War, with figures decreasing considerably since then (see Figure 25.3). This development has been evident in polities such as Germany, where the share of public sector representation was particularly high in comparison to other West European countries.

Public sector representation among MPs in the Bundestag declined by 37 per cent or 19 percentage points (from 51 per cent to 32 per cent) between 1990 and 2009. This levelling of extremes has reduced differences between West European polities, as confirmed by the observation that after the turn of the millennium the standard deviation for public sector
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representation reached its lowest level since the Second World War (see Figure 25.3). Changes in representation are even more pronounced in the case of the teaching profession, which is the single most important subcategory among MPs from the public sector. Since its peak at the beginning of the 1990s, the average share of members of the teaching profession in the parliaments of Western Europe has dropped by more than 20 per cent, signifying that this group has lost about half of its gains from the 1970s and 1980s (see Figure 25.4). This process was accompanied by a levelling of differences in the legislative recruitment of teachers and professors across West European polities. Although MPs with a professional background in the public service are still strongly represented in West European parliaments, a pluralization of recruitment channels can be observed. Assets such as certified loyalty towards the established political order and expertise in the policies of redistribution – qualities that can be ascribed to contenders from the public service – have become less valuable with the elimination of the consensus challenge.

These trends in legislative recruitment patterns were accompanied by a sharp increase in the turnover rates for individual MPs, whereby the average turnover rates in West European parliaments nearly doubled between the end of the 1980s and the mid-1990s (see Figure 25.5). The time series for newcomers reached a distinct peak during these years that was only exceeded during the periods of crisis recruitment after the First and Second World War. Although turnover rates have levelled off since the mid-1990s, they are still above the average levels of the post-Second World War era. In the late 1990s, incumbency (measured by the mean number of elections) plunged to its lowest level since the mid-1950s and it has not yet recovered. Standard deviations for both indicators have remained at relatively low levels, indicating that the increase in turnover and the decrease in incumbency were synchronous in West European polities. We consider these developments to be signs of a disturbance in the pre-1990 regime of legislative recruitment that has affected the established patterns of reproduction of West European

Figure 25.3 Legislators with a public sector employment background in European parliaments (1946–2005)

Source: West European DataCube, authors’ calculations.
Figure 25.4 Teachers and university professors among legislators in European parliaments (1947–2007)
Source: West European DataCube, East European DataCube, authors’ calculations.

Figure 25.5 Newcomers among legislators in new European parliaments (1946–2010)
Source: West European DataCube, East European DataCube, authors’ calculations.
representative elites. It is no coincidence that these changes occurred during and after the period of regime transition in Eastern Europe: the fall of communism there marked the end of the consensus challenge here.

Contemporary West European democracies are facing a new challenge today. This challenge does not stem from enemies within or outside the nation; rather, it is related to the growing distrust in politicians, scepticism with regard to democratic institutions and disillusionment about the functioning of the democratic process among citizens (Dalton 2004: 1). Research on West European legislators has shown that Russell Dalton’s observations concerning waning political support in modern democracies can be connected to the emergence of a representative elite that is both a producer and the product of the enforcement and expansion of representative democracies during the past 150 years. The application of a market model based on ‘free competition for a free vote’ (Schumpeter 1959: 259, 269) to the process of establishing a democratic leadership did not result in a thorough ‘opening of political societies’ or in a linear ‘expansion of choice opportunities’ (Blondel 1997: 96). Instead, the evolution of representative democracies was basically a process of establishing an autonomous field of political action characterized by a wide gap between insiders and outsiders. The process of ‘democratization’ was at least partially counterbalanced by a socially exclusive process of political ‘professionalization’.

The contradictory co-evolution of participatory democracy and political professionalism can be best understood in terms of the challenge–response model in which selectorates and electorates interact, offering and demanding political personnel capable of addressing the fundamental problems of the polity and society. New challenges, however, do not lead to indiscriminate access to the representative elite; rather, they bring about focused responses by selectorates through limited adaptations of the ‘recruitment function’ to changing demands. Developments follow paths directed both by democratization (i.e. the extension of the social niches from whence the electors and the elected are drawn) and by professionalization (i.e. the establishment of a fairly autonomous field of political action with specific, albeit generally informal, rules for access and reward). Democratization and professionalization are contradictory, in that they create a division between spheres of insiders and outsiders. Thus, long-term trends in West European parliamentary recruitment have not resulted in a harmonious community between electors and the elected, but instead in the inherently conflictual (although in most cases peaceful) coexistence of professional politicians who live from and for politics and amateur politicians (to use Max Weber’s term) – that is, the rest of us who are only incidentally involved in politics (Weber 1947). Much modern criticism of politicians’ alleged distance from the electorate and their ruthless pursuit of self-interest is based on the contradictory logic of the processes of professionalization and democratization (Best 2003).

Patterns of parliamentary representation in Eastern Europe since 1990

As it turned out, the fall of the Iron Curtain was not the ‘end of history’ (Fukuyama 1992), nor was it the starting point of a universal and irreversible process of democratization. More than 20 years after the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), some formerly communist countries have joined the European Union, while others remain hybrid regimes or have even downgraded to the level of consolidated autocracies. In addition to institutional developments and the corresponding rise in economic and political interdependence on the continent, can elite convergence be observed?

Under communist rule, the nobility and religion were severely oppressed, and these aspects of society have not become political divides following the demise of the old regimes. Instead, other barriers based on socio-economic status, ascriptive characteristics (e.g. gender and ethnicity)
and professionalization have structured parliamentary elite formation in former communist countries.

In West European parliaments, early democratization was characterized by the inclusion of disadvantaged social groups, particularly through leftist parties. Central and Eastern European parliaments, in contrast, essentially remain closed to these groups. East European parliamentarians have an impressively high level of formal education (see Figure 25.2). Even in the early 1990s, the proportion of university-educated MPs in CEE parliaments was around 90 per cent on average. Since then, virtually all CEE parliaments have experienced an influx of highly educated candidates (including those with academic titles). Because education has become a de facto prerequisite for a parliamentary position, groups and individuals with fewer cultural and economic resources (such as blue-collar workers and candidates with no post-secondary education) have been excluded from the pool of eligible candidates. At the same time, the representatives of teaching professions (i.e. teachers and professors) have gradually disappeared from CEE parliaments. In the 2000s, educators accounted for fewer than 10 per cent of MPs in CEE states (see Figure 25.4). The influx of teachers and liberal professionals (e.g. doctors and artists) into CEE parliaments in the early 1990s stemmed in part from the successes of the Umbrella Movements in the Baltic States. The subsequent declining recruitment of educators to parliaments in CEE parallels developments in Western Europe, where only about 15 per cent of MPs were educators by 2000 (Best 2007: 101).

In some CEE countries, the parliamentary ranks have slowly begun to open up to women and ethnic minorities. Out of all the CEE countries, only three parliaments (e.g. Slovenia, Macedonia and Serbia; IPU 2013) have achieved 30 per cent female representation, a number that is perceived as a threshold for effective female participation in politics (Christmas-Best and Kjær 2007: 77). Although more women have been recruited as parliamentarians with each new election in the Baltic countries, the Czech Republic and Poland, the share of female MPs in Romania, Ukraine and Hungary has continually hovered below the CEE average (Semenova et al. 2014: 289).

The first democratic elections have resulted in surprisingly diverse patterns of ethnic representation in CEE parliaments. In the parliaments of post-Soviet states (Russia, Ukraine and Moldova), ethnic minorities have been overrepresented in comparison with their proportion of the general population (Edinger and Kuklys 2007). In contrast, ethnic representation in the Baltic states was low during the early 1990s due to nationalist sentiments and restrictive citizenships laws. Since the late 1990s, the share of minority MPs has increased across the Baltic parliaments, especially in Latvia (Kuklys 2014: 130). Central and Eastern European countries use various instruments to ensure parliamentary representation for ethnic groups, ranging from the establishment of ‘reserved seats’ (e.g. Romania and Slovenia) to the sanctioning of ethnic parties (e.g. the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania) or parties with a strong ethnic component (e.g. the Movement for Right and Freedom in Bulgaria). In contrast, Russian law has prohibited ethnic and religious parties since the mid-1990s. Instead, pro-presidential parties (such as United Russia) serve as a vehicle for ethnic parliamentary candidates in Russia (Gaman-Golutvina 2014: 250).

One of the major challenges to former communist polities has been the transformation of planned economies into market-oriented economies (Bartlett and Hunter 1997). After the collapse of the old regimes, the new democracies experienced massive economic problems (e.g. the breakdown of local production) that have motivated them to pursue privatization and the liberalization of prices. Internal economic challenges have had international ramifications, with some CEE countries facing external financial pressure to pay off the debts of the ‘old’ regimes or demands from foreign companies to provide access to their new markets.
The establishment of free markets resulted in the emergence of entrepreneurs, who quickly became integrated into the new parliamentary elite. The extent of this development is a feature unique to CEE parliaments. Whereas the overall proportion of West European MPs with an entrepreneurial background has remained between 10 and 15 per cent (Best 2007: 99), the proportion of businessmen in CEE parliaments was as high as 23 per cent by the early 2010s (Semenova et al. 2014: 292). The overall increase in the number of entrepreneurs among CEE parliamentarians primarily reflects trends in Russia and Ukraine, followed by Latvia and Lithuania. The Russian and Ukrainian parliaments in particular have been ‘captured’ by these new economic elites, who enjoy good chances of election and re-election to parliament for multiple terms (Semenova 2011: 913–14; Semenova 2012: 554–6).

The collapse of communism has also provided new opportunities for state-building and the establishment of the institutions of representative democracy. The reorganization of communist administrative and political structures has been the major institutional impetus of the new regimes. Administrative elites have not suffered from substantial changes in personnel, as many members of the communist administrations and ministries remained in similar positions after 1990 (Szelényi and Szelényi 1995). In contrast, political elites experienced substantial turnover after the communist nomenklatura system was abolished, putting an abrupt end to predictable career paths. The disempowerment of the Communist Party has stimulated the formation of multiparty systems and the emergence of professional politicians in post-communist countries. The gradual consolidation of party systems in CEE has strengthened the role of political parties as the major selectorates for political offices. Throughout the post-communist period, the interdependence among administrative, political party and parliamentary personnel has continually increased, thereby integrating elites across different societal sectors. This development is fairly unsurprising in the CEE countries that adopted a parliamentary or parliamentary-presidential form of government (e.g. the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Hungary). Strong connections between civil servants and parliamentarians also exist in presidential-parliamentary regimes (e.g. Russia and Ukraine). Overall, high-ranking civil servants and professional politicians made up more than one-third of CEE parliamentary elites by 2009 (Semenova et al. 2014: 291–2). It seems that political expertise and proximity to the ‘political class’ have become increasingly important to the selectorates.

Institutional changes in CEE countries, including the legitimization of elites through elections and the emergence of new political parties, have increased the uncertainty of parliamentary careers. In order to improve their career opportunities, many MPs have begun to gain political experience before moving into national politics. The first post-communist parliaments were replete with political amateurs, i.e. MPs without any experience. By 2009, inexperienced MPs accounted for up to 40 per cent of these parliaments (see Figure 25.5). For CEE parliamentarians, the most important prior political experience is a leading position in their political party or election to regional political office (Semenova et al. 2014: 294–5). The share of MPs who had gained either of these types of political experience increased to more than 35 per cent by the late 2000s. These patterns of professionalization are more pronounced in some countries than in others. For instance, prospective MPs holding a leadership position in their party are particularly frequently recruited to the Polish, Croatian and Romanian parliaments. In contrast to many other CEE countries, prior local political experience has been of little importance for Bulgarian and Slovenian MPs since the collapse of communism.

The gradual emergence of a career ladder stretching from local political positions to the national level is one aspect of parliamentary professionalization (Squire 1992). Another aspect involves intra-parliamentary professionalization, which is manifested in the re-election of MPs to multiple legislative terms. A long tenure allows MPs to ‘learn’ the practical mechanisms of parliamentary
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decision-making and to build stable professional relationships. By the late 2000s, some 20 per cent of MPs in CEE parliaments had remained in office for at least three terms (incumbents). Simultaneously, the average influx of newcomers to CEE parliaments had declined from two-thirds to one-half (Semenova et al. 2014: 293).

However, these developments have not affected all CEE parliaments to the same extent (Edinger 2010: 129–52), as shown by the increasing standard deviation. In some countries (e.g. Romania and Croatia), the turnover rate has consistently remained over 50 per cent. At the other extreme, the Czech and Hungarian parliaments have been characterized by low turnover rates and high proportions of incumbents since the late 1990s. Because of substantial turnover, the proportion of politically inexperienced MPs has remained significant in Slovenia and Russia, among other countries. In some CEE countries (e.g. Lithuania and Estonia), incumbent parliamentarians do not always have better chances of intra-parliamentary promotion (Crowther and Matonytė 2007: 294–5), unlike, for example, American legislators (Praino and Stockemer 2012: 273).

In addition to challenges stemming from institutional developments, how politicians have chosen to handle the communist past of their country has been viewed as critical for democratization (Letki 2002: 529). Strategies for coping with the legacy of communism have varied widely (Semenova et al. 2014: 286–7). For example, in Poland and the Czech Republic lustration policies were implemented, whereby former communist politicians were excluded from the pool of eligible candidates for post-communist political positions. In Latvia, legal measures required former partisans of the old regime to identify themselves publicly. A different logic applied in those countries where the post-communist transformation was accompanied by nation-building processes. Because certain communist elites had supported nationalist movements (and occasionally even led them), their communist affiliations were less disadvantageous for their later careers. This pattern can be observed in Slovenia and even in the Baltic parliaments. Finally, communist affiliation has not negatively affected the survival opportunities of Russian, Ukrainian and Moldovan parliamentary elites.

These differences in dealing with the past have affected the quality of available information on politicians’ former allegiances. Since 1990, there has been an overall decline in the number of CEE parliamentarians with former communist loyalties. Since such experience is contingent on the age of the politician, this trend comes as no surprise. Across all CEE countries, it has been rare for the communist elite to retain their old positions during the post-communist transition – that is, there has been virtually no direct reproduction. At the same time, the promotion of the second echelon of the communist elite to higher positions in post-communist regimes (vertical elite reproduction) was much more common. Former members of the national nomenklatura retained influence via the horizontal reproduction of power, moving laterally to parliaments. Most strikingly, despite the many prominent politicians (e.g. Václav Havel and Lech Wałęsa) who attained power through mass protest movements, political dissidents had almost completely disappeared from the CEE parliamentary arena by the 2000s.

Generally speaking, many developments in post-communist elite formation have been appropriated from West European parliaments. One obvious example is the rise in the levels of female representation. Although the proportion of female MPs in CEE remains lower than that in Western Europe (Palmieri 2011), a slow convergence is underway. By 2009, CEE parliaments reached a level of female representation (almost 20 per cent) on a par with the level that existed in Western Europe during the late 1980s. Across Europe, however, the standard deviation has increased (Semenova et al. 2014: 289).

In the long history of West European parliaments, representatives have typically been associated with public service, agriculture and business (Best 2007: 104). In post-communist
Central and Eastern Europe, approximately half of the MPs have been drawn from education, public administration, business and professional politics (i.e. political parties or interest groups). However, the decline in the proportion of teachers is the only converging tendency among CEE parliamentarians; cross-country differences in the recruitment of other occupational groups have become more pronounced (Semenova et al. 2014: 290–1). The parliamentary elites of Western Europe have been more stable and less volatile than their CEE counterparts. Furthermore, with respect to parliamentarians’ level of prior political experience, the countries of CEE have now reached approximately the same stage that Western Europe had achieved shortly after the Second World War (Best 2007: 102). Whereas over the past 50 years the average West European MP has enjoyed a long legislative tenure – between two and three electoral mandates – the average tenure of post-communist parliamentarians stands at two mandates (up to 2009).

Conclusions

We interpret recent developments, such as the increasing pluralization of recruitment patterns, as responses to a legitimacy challenge that has emerged within the political systems of Western and Eastern democracies, rather than through the external confrontations that have characterized all the earlier challenges in the history of these polities (Best 2007). We relate this argument to Toynbee’s (1946: 60–79) theorem, which states that in facing external challenges, collective actors produce internal challenges that surface after these actors have prevailed over their initial challengers. These new internal challenges target elite quality, i.e. the ability of a representative democracy to produce efficient and accountable political elites. Institutional settings for elite recruitment, such as the cartel party based on arrangements between politicians to appropriate and share the resources of the state (Katz and Mair 1995), might be suitable to meet a consensus challenge, thereby creating a consensual political elite united by common material interests. In the long run, however, this would undermine the legitimacy of representative democracy, as the ingroup/outgroup differential would become too large to be justifiable by the achievements of the incumbents. The true nature of democracy is blurred if the competitive struggle for power is impeded. Due to the logics of its internal functioning, which is based on the balancing of interests, patronage, loyalty and discretion, the consensus model favours the trustee conception over the delegate conception of representation and prioritizes symbolic and relational assets over deferential and instrumental assets for legislative recruitment. Although it would be inappropriate to describe parliaments under the reign of the consensus model as assemblies of string-pullers and token representatives, some elements of truth can be recognized in this unpleasant scenario. Corruption and favouritism can be linked to a pattern of parliamentary representation which increases the insider–outsider differential and decreases the effectiveness of internal parliamentary controls. The emergence of the legitimacy challenge indicates that there may be more consensus in a consensual political elite than a consolidated democracy can endure. The closure of the political market through political professionalization and the pooling of interests between formally competing parties is an autocatalytic process that may jeopardize the workings of democracy. In this respect, the emergence of the legitimacy challenge is a promising indication that there are countervailing mechanisms of democracy that can infuse new competition into the system, thereby increasing the risk involved in the political profession.

The legitimacy challenge has far-reaching consequences for the unification of Europe. The Euroscepticism which could be found in small segments of the national political elites has become widespread in the general population (Best et al. 2012: 6). Disillusionment with European
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institutions has reinforced the disengagement of the general population from supporting further integration. Public hostility towards the distant Eurocracy and labyrinthine European institutions provided a breeding ground for national populism and the electoral success of populist parties across Europe (e.g. the People’s Orthodox Rally in Greece and ATAKA in Bulgaria). In some ways, national political elites have found themselves between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, they have to work hard to protect their decision leeway from interference by supranational institutions and pursue their careers in the national arena. Furthermore, they have become more exposed to bashing and (sometimes violent) mass protests. The range of possible strategies that elites can use to respond to the legitimacy challenge varies from the enforcement of populist sentiments (e.g. Jobbik in Hungary) to the transfer of political responsibilities to technocrats (e.g. technocratic governments in Italy and Latvia). On the other hand, embeddedness in the European institutional structures can also be a resource and help political elites to implement their country-specific conceptions of Europe and profit from the benefits of the EU membership (Best et al. 2012: 240). These are incentives for complying with European legislation and pushing through unpopular austerity policies.

The endogenous character of the legitimacy challenge will probably reduce the structural differences between Eastern and Western Europe. However, it will not lead to further European integration or the adoption of a pan-European identity. Delegitimized political elites may face difficulties in promoting and securing the integration of Europe. Whether the response strategies used by political elites will be sufficient to grant them new legitimacy in representative democracies is a question to be answered by future developments.

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