

A Leaderless European Union

Written by Sharanya Ravichandran

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The term 'leader' can be defined in many ways. For the purpose of this paper, a leader is one individual or group who leads or commands an organisation; a leader also embodies the combined powers of all institutions within that organisation, and pioneers the policy-making process from initiation to execution. The institutions and member states within the European Union exhibit leadership in many different ways, through the powers and influence that they exercise over policy-making. However, the powers are distributed among the institutions and even the member states; there is not one member state, institution or individual above the others that takes charge and steers policy-making. Therefore, the European Union is leaderless.

This paper utilises two theories to explain that the European Union is leaderless: supranationalism and liberal intergovernmentalism. The first section uses supranationalism to show that many institutions (above the member states) play significant roles in influencing the policy-making process, but the EU lacks one institution/individual to spearhead the process. The second section utilises liberal intergovernmentalism to explain that the member states themselves play a significant role in initiating and driving policy-making, but there is no one member state, or individual, that acts as a leader of the others in reaching consensus on a particular policy.

Supranationalism

Originally, the European Union was designed to foster and encourage cooperation in policy-making and decision-making between the various member states. In fact, the European Union and its institutions are "not designed for the leadership purpose as it is understood in the national contexts".[1] There is no single designated individual that makes or signs policies that the member states all have to follow. The institutions above the member states were historically meant to and, to this day, operate under the notion of collective leadership[2]; they work together to construct and design policies in the Union. However, the Union does not have a single leader whose position combines the powers of all of the institutions and takes charge above the rest of the institutions to drive policy-making. Thus, the EU is, by definition, leaderless.

Both the European Council and the European Commission have positions of President. The creation of both positions has been "widely interpreted as representing an attempt to close an acute leadership deficit"[3]. Both Presidents do have significant responsibilities within the Union; however, they work with one another, as well as the other branches, to achieve goals and execute policies. Neither of the Presidents possesses the powers of *all* the institutions in the Union; they still have to work with the other institutions to execute policies and determine the political direction of the EU. The European Commission's functions, however, illustrate that the institutions above the member states are strategic vehicles for policy-making.[4] The way that these institutions are organised ensures that power is not concentrated too much in the hands of one group, and is diffused among the institutions. However, even with these branches in place, there is not one leader who takes charge at any point and spearheads the entire process. On the contrary, the different branches divide the process up and are responsible for different parts of it, in the end coming together to produce a cohesive policy. The supranational institutions within the European Union exhibit elements of leadership, but that does not translate to the European Union having a single leader; these institutions only "have elements of 'actorness'...and...have potent shaping effects on....governments' strategies".[5] These institutions may be above the member states and have significant shaping power on the policies affecting member states, but all this proves is that the European Union can be seen as a supranational entity; it still remains that the Union is, in fact,

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leaderless.

Looking specifically at the European Commission, the President exists in a position where he has significant agenda-setting power; he can help member states resolve obstacles[6] to reach a consensus on policy discrepancies. The President is also responsible for making sure that all Union legislation is enforced. Even after examining the amount of responsibilities and power that the President holds, it should be noted that he works with the other branches of the Union to achieve goals; without this teamwork, bad bureaucracy would reign.[7] Though the Commission President is head of the most powerful office in the Union, and therefore holds important leadership powers, he shares those powers with the Council and with other branches. Ergo, the Union as a whole is still leaderless. It does not have one individual to take a policy from initial proposal to the final stage. The European Union has become more supranational by establishing the positions of Council and Commission Presidents. However, due to the Union's lack of a clearly defined presidential role within its treaties[8], the President does not occupy the role of a traditional leader; therefore, The European Union still lacks a leader in the conventional sense. Granted, bringing the position of European Commission President to the forefront has given the Union an increased amount of legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. However, the Commission has gained respect as policymaker, but only side by side with the Council; it is still not viewed as a lone actor. Though the increased powers of these two branches may be viewed as threats to the member states[9], this is not the case; they simply enhance the supranational nature of the Union. This also helps to explain that the European Union is still leaderless, although its supranational institutions are taking on more leadership roles, both in number and importance.

Because the member states acted too much in their own national interests as opposed to the common goals of the European Union, the Union felt that it needed to make the position of Commission President more prominent, even though it has been around for a long time. For this reason, the rotating member-state Presidency was replaced with the position of the Commission President. This major reform in the Presidency role "moves the EU away from its founding principle of shared leadership and equality between states, at least at the top level".[10] This move has also made the Union much more supranational in nature, since more powers have been given to the institutions above the member states. In fact, "The European Union is a polity...rather than simply a policy-making arena. It represents the extension of political space above the level of the state, rather than simply another form of international organisation."[11] The institutions above the member states have more power and have significant weight on the outcome of policies and decisions. They demonstrate elements of leadership within the Union, but not one of them is a leader of the Union as a whole.

The Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) exemplifies this perfectly; although most member states do participate, the criteria that the EMU assigns for a country to meet for membership shows that it is above the member states, and makes rules that the member states must meet and follow. The institutions within the European Union have significant powers in influencing the policy-making process, and they all play a part in the final outcome of policies. Nevertheless, there is an absence of one individual or branch to take the reins and steer the entire process. Ergo, the European Union is conventionally leaderless.

Liberal Intergovernmental Theory

One primary purpose behind the European Union was to get the member states to work together more cohesively, and to solve discrepancies in policies that each country might have, by cooperating with one another. This in itself suggests a liberal intergovernmental nature to the design of the Union. Even to this day, the Council and Commission, along with the other branches, do have significant power in the final steps of policy-making. Yet, the member states initiate and drive much of the process, and therefore still possess significant clout within the Union. Before the policy goes to the final stages, member states work with one another through negotiations and discussions to reach consensus on the policy. Still, there is no dominant power to 'lead' them or point them in a certain direction, nor is there one state that takes a pre-eminent role in leading the others.[12]

The Commission President is not a leader by the textbook definition because the image of the Union is as an international organisation as opposed to being viewed as a state[13] [14] [15] compared with Presidents in more traditional roles within nations, he does not initiate, organise or take the lead on policy-making. One can argue that

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the more powerful member states are sometimes the true driving force behind policy-making in the Union: “special emphasis is given to...the role of major players, notably the ‘Big Three’, that is, the UK, France and Germany”.[16] The President tries to reach and interpret consensus among the member states’ views with regard to a policy. Nevertheless, the more powerful member states (i.e. France and Germany) might sway his decision or have heavy influence on the final version of the policy. This demonstrates the intergovernmental nature and the significant role that member states do play in policy initiatives. The states can sometimes act as indirect leaders; France and Germany, for instance, direct integration and provide leadership when they see fit. However, the European Union as an organisation is still leaderless. The more powerful member states play a prominent role in shaping policy and at times fill the void where a leader should be, but there is still a lack of one key individual/group that steers all the states, and the Union itself, in a certain direction. Though the Commission President holds significant agenda-setting powers, the member states suggest and initiate policies that the European Union will consider as a whole. The member states have a significant role in the Union, even though the branches above them also possess key powers. The member states *choose* to pool and delegate sovereignty to the institutions the above them, such as the Commission, in order to have policy coordination and to add credibility to their policy commitments.[17] However, the member states still have considerable powers in initiating, and influencing the outcome of, various policies. One member state does not steer the others in policy-making; there is no one actor above the member states that possesses comprehensive powers and guides the member states in reaching a decision on a policy. There is a lack of central authority vested in one individual[18], so the EU is leaderless.

There are a variety of actors that play a role along with the member states with regard to policy formation. Economic, political and a variety of other interests fight for importance in these policies, and many other institutions also try to influence the outcome. With so many minor players acting alongside the major ones, liberal intergovernmentalism is prominent in the European Union. If these actors work individually to influence policy, they do not have enough authority to direct either the policy or European integration in its entirety[19]; working together with the member states and other groups increases their influence and the volume of their voice, so they’re heard. This is an important element that illustrates the liberal intergovernmental manner of the Union because so many actors below the major institutions play a significant role and work together in influencing a piece of policy. Even though there are twenty-seven member states now as opposed to the original six with which the Union was designed, all of the member states continue to try and work together regarding policy-making. The member states work with the minor players and major institutions to process policies; the Commission, Council and Parliament also work together to process legislation into law.

The EMU can also be used as an example here to explain the cohesion with which the institutions and the member states all work to influence policy. Even though the current set of conditions (the Copenhagen Criteria) that member states need to meet to join EMU is set by the Union itself, the member states worked together to arrive at the final policy idea of sharing a single currency in the first place. Precisely because so many elements work together within the Union, a single institutionally supported leader[20] does not exist. The different institutions within the Union will not relinquish power to one major individual at the top, because they all enjoy having a significant role within the system, and having power to influence the final policy outcome.

The European Council is also an example of the liberal intergovernmental nature of the Union. The Council, not initially part of the structure of the European Union, was created because “it was felt that the EU needed an impetus from the top level from among member-state governments in order to guide the general political direction of the Union”.[21] The Council started as an informal venue for the heads of member states to discuss policies, but has now evolved into a major intergovernmental organisation for member states to set the political direction for the Union. Though there is a supranational element to the Council in that there is a President above the heads of government who direct directs the meetings, the fact that it is made for the convening of member states makes it intergovernmental.

Conclusion

There are several actors within the Union that have a hand in processing policies and legislation, all of them demonstrating elements of leadership. However, there is no one individual or group whose powers extend above the

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rest to lead and have final say on both design and execution of a particular policy. The Union works in the form of both supranational institutions, and through liberal intergovernmentalism in the form of cooperation and teamwork from the member states. One scholar has noted that the European Union is “an unprecedented, unique and horribly complex combination of the supranational and the intergovernmental...”[22] The Union is a convoluted organisation, and encompasses a complicated mix of both theories at work. Different players take on leadership roles through the policy-making process. At the crux, however, the European Union is an organisation and is not regarded as a state[23]; as such, it is leaderless and “lacks nearly every characteristic that grants a modern European state...its authority”.[24] Many European states have a single individual leader who controls all aspects of policymaking and encompasses the powers of that state’s many institutions in their one position. With the European Union, there is no one actor above all the others, whose role embodies the combination of powers that the other actors possess. Not one individual/group exists, that acts as a leader on behalf of the Union as a whole, in the sense that traditional leaders would do.

Thus far, the absence of one consensually elected leader has been supplanted with “[rhetoric], ‘flexibility clauses’, or ‘reinforced cooperations’”[25], so the void in the system for one main leader has not been felt as strongly. However, if the European Union wishes to expand further in both size and power, it needs a strong and effective leader who can not only do what the President of the Commission does, but do what he does along with what the member states, and other branches, also do, all combined into one position. Creating a 2.5-year Presidency in the European Commission was a very significant step in moving toward successful leadership, but the President is still externally very dependent on the Council and Parliament for support and power. As a result, for now, the European Union remains leaderless.

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