

POLICY BRIEF
Reconsidering Jacques Delors' Leadership of the European Union
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Jacques Delors' presidency of the European Commission (1985-1994) exemplifies transformative leadership in the European Union. The basic choices of the EU, neither a state nor a classic international organization, are shaped in multilateral bargaining among member states. However, supranational institutions, the Commission in the first instance, also participate in defining European goals and plans. To lead, any Commission president must first achieve consensus in a college of commissioners, each the political head of a branch of the EU executive bureaucracy. Beyond this, Commission presidents must be able to influence intergovernmental decision-making. Combining these two roles has historically been very difficult.

With support from France and Germany, Delors' successes began with the 1985 Single Market program, the first of several Commission exercises at presenting innovative win-win proposals to member states. The Single Market program unleashed energy and support that the Delors Commission then invested in new projects, following an *engrenage* strategy in which each step was designed to lock-in movement toward the next, an engineered spillover to generate successive win-win intergovernmental solutions. In time, as the end of the Cold War created new challenges, Franco-German preferences over monetary union diverged, and the UK strayed, member states grew wary of the Commission's strategies, and Delors' leadership faltered. Following the 1992 Maastricht treaty, member states began retreating to more intergovernmentalism as citizens worried whether the EU had become too domineering. The decline of Delors' leadership had become clear in 1993 when member states refused to support his White Paper on *Growth, Competitiveness, and Employment*.

What might the Delors example, its legendary successes and its eventual decline, say about Commission presidential leadership? Delors' good fortune was that political contingencies put him in the right place at the right time. A centre-left Catholic who had helped François Mitterrand, in France's internal political manoeuvring, move towards a political stance that shared common ground with the German leadership, Delors as Minister of the Economy had ably steered France's return to the European fold and helped rebuild the Franco-German 'couple.' A second factor was the creativity of his intellectual and entrepreneurial approaches to leadership. With his team he mobilized the Commission around the *engrenage* strategy that worked because Commission proposals solved pressing problems for major member states. This was always a political high-wire act, however. Member state opposition to growing Commission power fuelled growing wariness. Even win-win projects risked being side-lined if they involved money or a reallocation of sovereignty. The end of the Cold War after 1989 created uncertainty that made member states increasingly reluctant to assign tasks to the Commission.

Jacques Delors faced the same challenges of any Commission president. But his strategic and organizational skills meant he could sometimes find levers to lift constraints and enhance the position of the Commission. Since his presidency, member states have avoided appointing presidents who might 'do a Delors'. Treaty changes that require Commission presidents to come from the political family of the largest group in the Parliament may yet give them enhanced space to lead, but enlargement from the 12 member states of Delors' years to today's 28 has also increased member state diversity and made intergovernmental bargaining even more complicated.

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