

POLICY BRIEF
Leadership in the European Council:
An Assessment of Herman Van Rompuy's Presidency
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Political leadership is difficult to evaluate in any political system, let alone in one as multifaceted as the EU. The advent of the elected European Council President brought an additional level of complexity to the study of EU leadership. Herman Van Rompuy became the European Council's first elected President in 2009 and served the maximum possible two-terms in office, stepping down in 2014.

Leadership studies in the EU have focused mostly on the Commission presidency. Ingeborg Tömmel's framework for analyzing that office is useful also for analyzing the European Council presidency. Tömmel evaluates leadership in light of institutional setting, situational context, and personal qualities, with a view to determining whether a particular incumbent is transformational or merely transactional.

The European Council presidency lacks the potential to be truly transformative. Institutionally, it is a weak office, bringing prominence and close proximity to power, but not the potential of power itself. There are considerable constraints on the office holder becoming a strong leader. National chief executives, who meet more frequently and take more consequential decisions in the European Council than ever before, are jealous of their prerogatives and are unlikely to become willing followers. They, and especially the leaders of the big countries, would be loath to allow the President to assume the limelight, to act independently, to take bold initiatives, and to become entrepreneurial. Though able to reach beyond the Brussels bubble by giving interviews, making speeches, and tweeting, the European Council President is unable to mobilize a large public following.

Within these constraints, Van Rompuy was an effective President because he understood the formal and informal rules of the game. Unassuming—or as unassuming as a successful politician could possibly be—he made a virtue of avoiding attention. Conciliatory—he had been prime minister of Belgium, a notoriously fractured polity—he drew heavily on his skills as a broker and dealmaker. A good linguist, he could conduct business in French, German, and English—a vital advantage when conversing with the leaders of the “big three”—France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. His familiarity with economic issues helped greatly during the euro crisis, which dominated his presidency. Van Rompuy and his team, a surprisingly small staff, cultivated an image of him as modest, impartial, dispassionate, wise, highly competent, and clever. To a great extent the image fit reality, which helps explain Van Rompuy's qualified success at a time of severe political and economic crisis for the EU.

Regardless of the incumbent, it seems incontrovertible that having a standing presidency has improved the functioning of the European Council, thereby strengthening transactional leadership at a precarious time in EU history. This institutional innovation was long overdue, given the ascendancy of the European Council and the increasing intensity of intergovernmentalism in the EU system of governance. As the first incumbent, Van Rompuy shaped the office in ways that improved the functioning of the European Council and will be advantageous to his successors.

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