Review Article

Assessing EU council presidencies: (Conditions for) success and influence

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Small States and EU Governance. Leadership through the Council Presidency

Simone Bunse

Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire, 2009, 290pp., \$95, ISBN: 978-0333711095 (hardback)

Readjusting the Council Presidency. Belgian Leadership in the EU

Steven Van Hecke and Peter Bursens (eds.)

Academic & Scientific Publishers, Brussels, 2011, 288pp., €26.95, ISBN: 978-9054878520 (paperback)

Le système présidentiel de l'Union européenne après Lisbonne

Véronique Charléty and Michel Mangenot (eds.)

École nationale d'administration, Strasbourg, 2011, 246pp., €20, ISBN: 978-2111291553 (paperback)

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Introduction

The importance of the rotating Council Presidency (hereafter: Presidency) for EU decision making has steadily grown since its creation in the 1950s. Although initially a mere administrator, the Presidency has become a functional and accountable element of EU policymaking (see, for example, Westlake and Galloway, 2004). This evolution gave rise to increased academic interest. Today, research on the Presidency is part of the mainstream study of the EU political system. Whereas early contributions consisted primarily of descriptions of the Presidency's tasks and commentaries on individual Presidencies, the past decade has witnessed the emergence of more theoretically framed (comparative) studies.

This article takes stock of the existing literature on the Presidency. In doing so, it gives particular attention to studies assessing Presidency performance, which

occupy an important strand of the literature. Such studies tend to depart from either an ‘influence’ or a ‘success’ approach, that is, they either study the extent to which the Presidency made a difference in decision making – influence – or how the Presidency behaved and/or how much of its goals were reached – success. However, the analytical differences between these two concepts have not yet been thoroughly analysed; some authors even consider them as interchangeable. As will be argued in the present article, this has far-reaching consequences: authors examining Presidency performance have drawn partially contradictory conclusions, depending on their focus on influence or success.

The three books under review are a good starting point for analysing the strengths and weaknesses of the literature in this regard, and for developing a research agenda. The edited volume of Charléty and Mangenot offers a legal and practical analysis of the current (post-Lisbon) responsibilities of the rotating Presidency. Bunse compares the *influence* of three Presidencies (Finland, Belgium and Greece between 1999 and 2003) on internal market and external policies, and the volume edited by Van Hecke and Bursens discusses the *success* of the Belgian 2010 Presidency in a wide range of policy areas. While offering valuable accounts of the priorities, achievements, and internal and external contexts of the Presidency, the latter two contributions are testimony to how the failure to sufficiently clarify the concepts of influence and success impacts on research results regarding Presidency performance.

The present article makes two main arguments. First, more precise operationalizations of Presidency influence and success should be developed in order to enhance our understanding of the nature of Presidency performance. Moreover, researchers studying Presidency performance should clarify their influence/success approach and take the effect of this approach on the results into account. Second, more systematic and comparative research of Presidency performance is needed, which would allow for clear accounts of the conditions that shape this performance, and would reveal possible causal complexity.

We start with a general review of the literature on the Presidency, sketching the leading theoretical approaches, methodologies and empirical scope, while highlighting the main shortcomings and gaps. Subsequently, we discuss the debates on the concepts of influence and success, and illustrate the dissimilarities between the two. We then offer an overview of the conditions for influence/success that have been identified in the literature, and show how different approaches can produce diverging results. In conclusion, we summarize the main arguments of the article, and suggest a number of areas for future research.

Studies on the Presidency: State of the Art

We distinguish four strands in the growing body of Presidency literature (for alternative classifications, see Elgström, 2003; Niemann and Mak, 2010). First,

there are descriptive studies of the Presidency roles and functioning in EU decision making (for example, Charlty and Mangenot, 2011; Westlake and Galloway, 2004; Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace, 2006; Kirchner, 1992; Fernndez Pasarn, 2009). A second group of literature includes assessments of single Presidencies, such as Van Hecke and Bursens (2011), contributions to the *Journal of Common Market Studies (JCMS)* Annual Reviews and various national journals. Third, a number of studies takes a comparative approach for analysing Presidency behaviour (Elgstrm, 2003), influence and leadership (for example, Bunse, 2009; Tallberg, 2006b), and success (Quaglia and Moxon-Browne, 2006; Drulk and abi, 2010). The fourth strand touches upon some specific Presidency-related issues, such as preference formation of the incumbent (Buchet de Neuilly, 2011; Verhoeff and Niemann, 2011), the role of norms for Presidency behaviour (Elgstrm, 2006; Niemann and Mak, 2010), the effect on national administrations (for example, Charlty in Charlty and Mangenot, 2011; Wurzel, 1996) or the adequateness of the rotating Presidency system for securing policy agreement and coordination in the EU (Bunse, 2009; Wurzel, 1996; Schout, 2008).

The contribution of the first category is mostly empirical. For example, the edited volume of Charlty and Mangenot provides a detailed description of the rotating Presidency, its functions and (evolving) inter-institutional relations. It meticulously sketches the surge in responsibilities, the increasing accountability of the Presidency as well as the legal and political context in which it operates, and the opportunities and limits for the incumbent to shape EU policies. As such, it is the most up-to-date account of the evolution of the Presidency and its place in the post-Lisbon institutional architecture. However, the analysis is not theoretically framed, although this was not the ambition of the editors.

By contrast, the three other categories within the literature have accommodated an increasing amount of theoretically informed research, mostly linked to the debate between rational choice and sociological institutionalist approaches (see, for example, March and Olsen, 1998; Niemann and Mak, 2010). Rationalist approaches view (EU Member) States as rational actors trying to maximize their influence in negotiations; the Presidency is an additional power resource. States act according to a 'logic of anticipated consequences'. Sociological approaches explain behaviour through a 'logic of appropriateness', that is, it is assumed that negotiators behave according to norms and role concepts, which they truly believe to be appropriate. Whereas some studies are explicitly inspired by rational choice institutionalism (for example, Bunse, 2009; Tallberg, 2006a), others (Elgstrm, 2003; Niemann and Mak, 2010; Verhoeff and Niemann, 2011) have attempted to build bridges and examined which logic plays under which circumstances.

Research methods used for Presidency studies are predominantly qualitative. They include legal descriptions of the Presidency (for example, Charlty and

Mangenot, 2011), single case (for example, Van Hecke and Bursens, 2011, contributions to the *JCMS* Annual Reviews) and comparative studies (Bunse, 2009; Elgström, 2003; Drulák and Šabič, 2010). Data are mainly gathered through document and process tracing analyses, but interviews are also an important source of information. The literature also contains a number of *large N*, quantitative studies (Schalk *et al*, 2007; Warntjen, 2007; Thomson, 2008) of Presidency influence. These studies offer valuable insights regarding the effect of timing, voting method, preference extremity and salience. However, on the down side, quantitative methods have difficulties to take less 'visible' issues such as (in)formal norms, agenda exclusion or reputation into account. In addition, existing quantitative studies focus exclusively on influence on finalized legislation, and do not consider other ways of exerting Presidency influence, for example, inhibiting decision making or launching new ideas. A general remark applicable to all types of methodologies employed thus far is that they fall short in revealing causal complexity. For example, small State Presidencies could be more influential than large State Presidencies, but only if they fulfil a number of other conditions such as good reputation and extensive preparation. Existing studies do not systematically highlight combinations of factors that can explain Presidency performance.

The empirical scope of existing Presidency research is broad, both in terms of countries and policy areas covered. Ample attention has been paid to how small States can increase their influence through the office of the Presidency (Bunse, 2009; Arter, 2000; Bengtsson *et al*, 2004; Thorhallsson and Wivel, 2006) and, more recently, to the role of the Presidency in the post-Lisbon institutional architecture. The edited volume of Charléty and Mangenot contributes to our understanding of the Presidency's relations with and current divisions of labour/power between the different actors in decision making. The authors identify the rotating Council Presidency as one of the five presidential functions in the EU, the others being the Permanent President of the European Council (PPEC), the 'trio' Presidencies, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Vice-President of the Commission (HRVP), and semi-permanent Presidencies of the Eurogroup and several preparatory bodies. The Lisbon Treaty introduced new rules and formalized previously existing practices that, taken together, limit the role of individual Presidencies. It changed the Presidency's responsibilities most drastically with regard to the European Council (see the chapter by Gillissen or Rittelmeyer) and external policies (see the chapter by Maurer, Pomorska and Vanhoonacker, but also Debaere *et al*, 2011). The contributors to Van Hecke and Bursens analyse the success of the Belgian Presidency in this new institutional framework. Future research should further investigate how the different Council configurations and policy levels relate to each other in practice, and which role the Presidency can play beyond this formal framework.

With the exception of Drulák and Šabič (2010), there is still little research on first-time Presidencies of new Member States. Niemann and Mak (2010) have identified some further blank spots in the literature, for example, the absence of comparisons between the role of the chair within the EU and within other multilateral settings. Tallberg (2010) took an important step to fill this void with his comparison of formal leadership in the EU, the WTO and UN environmental conferences. Another shortcoming in the literature concerns the lack of knowledge on the conditions that shape Presidency performance, including the incumbent's relations with the EU institutions and other Member States, external events, experience, size and policy areas (for example, legislative and non-legislative policies). The relevance of policy levels (preparatory bodies versus Council) is also largely under-researched. Wurzel (1996) discussed the different levels, but did not indicate how the Presidency's role and influence differ in this respect. We argue that these shortcomings in the literature are related to a largely overlooked problem; the definition and operationalization of the concepts of 'influence' and 'success' are often not sufficiently clarified, which has an impact on the research results. We elaborate on this in the next sections.

The Role of 'Influence' and 'Success' Concepts in Presidency Research

Presidencies face the dilemma of 'getting things done' versus promoting own national interests (Bjurulf, 2001). The chair is expected to serve the EU and effectively manage decision making, but national politicians and administrations may also want to use the Presidency seat to prioritize certain issues they find important. Evaluations of Presidency performance tend to be concerned with evaluating only one side of this dilemma, and can be clustered depending on which side they focus on. When studying national interest representation, authors highlight the 'influence' of the Presidency: they discuss how and to which extent the chair has used its position to bring decisions closer to its own preferences. Conversely, authors assessing Presidencies in terms of 'success' – or alternatively 'efficiency' – usually look at the 'getting things done' side. The analytical differences between influence and success have not yet been profoundly analysed; some authors even use the concepts as quasi-synonyms (for example, Quaglia and Moxon-Browne, 2006; Warntjen, 2007). This is also the case in the books by Bunse and Van Hecke and Bursens. Bunse studies Presidency influence, while defining the conditions for influence as 'conditions for success' (pp. 55–70). Van Hecke and Bursens (p. 20) draw on the work of Bunse – and the latter is one of the contributors to their edited volume – when developing their research questions on Presidency success. In other words, although both books study different questions, they refer to influence and

success as synonyms. In what follows, we will first show how these concepts differ, and then illustrate how research results may vary according to the influence or success approach that is taken.

Presidency influence

Presidency influence has been the subject of much academic debate, centred around four questions.

First, not everybody agrees that the chair can, or even should, exert any particular influence. Although a considerable amount of studies (for example, Putnam, 1988; Bjurulf, 2001; Farrell and Héritier, 2004; Schalk *et al.*, 2007; Warntjen, 2007; Thomson, 2008; Pintelon and Van Lancker, 2011) has shown that the Presidency does exert influence on EU policies, some scholars are more sceptical. Often quoted in this respect is Dewost (1984, p. 2), who claimed that the Presidency is a ‘responsibility without power’ (translated from French) and who was followed by others (for example, Ludlow, 1993; Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace, 2006). Also Culley and colleagues, contributors to the edited volume of Charléty and Mangenot, state that ‘[t]he Presidency is [...] neither an institution nor an instrument of power. It is a service that every Member State has to deliver to its partners’ (p. 79, translated from French).

Second, among scholars examining Presidency influence, there is disagreement on the definition of influence and its relation to power. Bunse studies the leadership capacities of the Presidency, meaning ‘an asymmetrical relationship of influence in which one actor guides or directs the behaviour of others towards a certain goal over a certain period of time’ (p. 5). Influence is understood as the ability ‘to change an outcome from what it otherwise would have been in the absence of an action’ (p. 5). Betsill and Corell (2001) define power as a general ability to exert influence, and influence as impact on concrete files, decisions or people. Power may be translated into influence, but this does not necessarily occur, and conversely, actors may exert influence without being powerful. Arts and Verschuren (1999) have suggested to include anticipation of others in the definition of influence, thus leaving out the intentional element that one finds in Bunse’s understanding of influence, and coming very close to the concept of power as described by Betsill and Corell.

A third issue of debate concerns the notion of interests. When studying the influence of any actor, this actor is supposed to defend certain interests. Although the predominant theoretical approaches – rationalism and constructivism – both recognize that Member States pursue interests in the EU and that the office of the Presidency can increase their influence, they conceptualize the nature of interests differently. Rational choice perspectives (for example, Tallberg, 2010) assume that the interests are ‘given’ and known by the actors.

By contrast, constructivist approaches (for example, Buchet de Neuilly, 2011) argue that preferences intensify during (preparations for) the Presidency, as policymakers expect that their role will allow them to have additional leverage and they want to take their chance.

The fourth issue of debate is methodological. Alongside the general methodological problem of a lack of insight in causal complexity (see above), an additional issue for studying influence is counterfactuality: it is impossible to know what would have happened if another country was in the chair, and to define whether a country was influential because of its Presidency role or due to other factors (Warntjen, 2007, 2008).

Presidency success versus influence

Similarly, scholars are divided on the definition of a successful Presidency. Van Hecke and Bursens define Presidency success as ‘having realized the priorities that were set in the Presidency programme and having coped adequately with unexpected events’ (p. 23). Their study is based on a supply/demand framework, developed by Schout and Vanhoonacker (2006, p. 1057). They argue that the situation dictates which Presidency roles are needed: supply consists of the priorities and actions of the Presidency, whereas demand includes the expectations of other Member States and what the situation requires. Schout and Vanhoonacker used the term ‘effective’ instead of ‘successful’ for Presidency performance. In their view, a chair is effective if it provides the adequate role supply to a certain demand. It is a useful framework for *ex post* analyses of Presidency success, but it does not allow researchers to formulate expectations about the conditions under which Presidencies will or will not be effective.

Other indicators for successful or ‘good’ Presidencies, suggested in the literature, are: correct performance of the different roles/functions (Quaglia and Moxon-Browne, 2006; Maurer, 2008; Debaere *et al.*, 2011); legislative output – the more (complicated) files a Presidency manages to complete, the more successful (Bjurulf and Elgström, 2004; De Ville *et al.*, 2011; Drieskens, 2011); good relations and coordination with the EU institutions (De Ville *et al.*, 2011; Drieskens, 2011); continuity in decision making, and more generally the extent to which the Presidency promotes the European integration process (Schout, 1998).

In any case, it is clear that Presidency influence is not the same as success. A Presidency that delivers on its priorities can be called successful, but is not necessarily influential – for example, when the incumbent includes ‘easy’ issues in its programme in order to claim credit afterwards (see also Warntjen, 2007). Conversely, if Presidencies manage to push through or block decisions against the will of a significant number of other Member States, they exert disproportionate influence, although this behaviour may damage their reputation

and lead to negative comments about their success. Pintelon and Van Lancker (2011) were the first to clearly differentiate between Presidency influence and success. Yet, they did not engage in an in-depth analysis of the substance of and differences between both concepts. Such an analysis is still missing in the literature.

Authors studying Presidency success have a broader focus than those focusing on influence. As shown above, success has many aspects; it may even include 'leadership' as an adequate reaction to unexpected events. On the other hand, Van Hecke and Bursens argue in their concluding chapter that Belgium's Presidency was successful because it did not pursue a national agenda. In other words, exerting influence is possible in their success approach, as long as the Presidency pursues 'European' goals. The difference between influence and success approaches can indeed be framed within the national and the EU level. Studying Presidency influence is about the extent to which national Governments employ the office of the Presidency to bring decisions closer to their preferences – which may but do not necessarily contradict the 'European' agenda. In turn, authors discussing Presidency success take the EU level as a point of reference and assess the extent to which the chair has 'done a good job'. To some extent, the supply/demand model of Schout and Vanhoonacker (2006) integrates both levels: it recognizes that the Presidency defends national as well as European interests. One of the four possible Presidency roles it discerns is that of national representative. Yet, their starting point is still a European one: national interest representation is only considered adequate in the event of a demand for this role.

As is the case for influence, studying Presidency success faces particular methodological problems, because it is difficult to measure. Success is often defined in a 'negative' way, that is, the absence of failures: 'while failures are often attributed to particular presidencies, successes [...] always have several mothers and fathers' (Ojanen and Vuohula, 2007, p. 23). Kaczyński (2011) has proposed a more 'positive' framework with three categories of success: 'poor' (make a mistake or fail to play a relevant role), 'well' (there are some failures, neither provoked nor prevented by the Presidency) and 'very well' (a maximum of what was possible and desirable was achieved).

A large number of conditions determining Presidency performance have been proposed and analysed in the literature. In the following paragraphs, we review these conditions, and show how they are found to work differently according to the influence/success approach.

Conditions for presidency performance

Conditions for Presidency performance can be divided in three categories: conditions related to the external context, national conditions and characteristics of

specific issues or policy areas. The first category of conditions, the external context, includes both foreseeable and unexpected conditions that cannot be manipulated by individual countries. Presidencies are most likely to be influential when there is a favourable external *political and economic environment* (Bunse, 2009; Pintelon and Van Lancker, 2011). *External crises* may entail opportunities for providing leadership (Bunse, 2009; Langdal and von Sydow, 2009). However, the contributors to the edited volume of Van Hecke and Bursens note that the external economic and political contexts are less likely to have an impact on Presidency success under the Lisbon Treaty, as the HRVP – who chairs the Foreign Affairs Council – and the PPEC – who heads the European Council – are now the main institutional actors in those areas where the external context plays a role.

The second category of conditions, ‘national’ conditions, is related to the domestic context and organization of the Presidency. There is agreement in the literature on three national conditions. First, early and thorough *preparation* promotes both influence (Bunse, 2009; Arter, 2000) and success (Van Hecke and Bursens, 2011; Pollak and Puntischer Riekmann, 2007; Maurer, 2008; Vanhoonacker *et al.*, 2010; Drieskens, 2011). Second, Bunse and Van Hecke and Bursens highlight the positive effect of *Brussels-based Presidencies* – far-reaching autonomy for the permanent representation *vis-à-vis* the capital – on influence and success, respectively. Third, a *good reputation* – which means giving the ‘right example’ in the policy areas under discussion, having a pro-EU attitude, and being impartial (Quaglia and Moxon-Browne, 2006; Jakobsen, 2009) – is found to increase influence (Bunse, 2009; Karoliewski and Sus, 2011) and success (Van Hecke and Bursens, 2011; Quaglia and Moxon-Browne, 2006; Maurer, 2008; Vanhoonacker *et al.*, 2010). Expertise (Tallberg, 2004; Quaglia and Moxon-Browne, 2006) and experience in multilateral negotiations (Drieskens, 2011) contribute to a good reputation. Bunse notes that the reputation also depends on the personal skills of individual chairpersons.

On three national conditions, however, there is less consensus in the literature. A first point of contention is the effect of *networks* – alliances with other Member States, regional networks, personal ties, inter-institutional relations. Both Bunse and Van Hecke and Bursens, as well as other authors, identify well-developed networks as a favourable condition for influence (see also Bjurulf, 2001; Karoliewski and Sus, 2011) or success (confirmed by Quaglia and Moxon-Browne, 2006; Pollak and Puntischer Riekmann, 2007; Vanhoonacker *et al.*, 2010; Drieskens, 2011). However, Bunse (pp. 68–69) raises an important remark. Good relations with the Council Secretariat give the Presidency an information advantage, but the Secretariat can also limit the chair’s influence: it reminds the Presidency of the neutrality norm, it prevents the incumbent from dropping agenda items on which decisions have previously been taken, and it is not always neutral itself.

Second, the role of *size* is controversial. Some (Baillie, 1998; Bengtsson *et al.*, 2004; Thorhallsson and Wivel, 2006) have pointed out that small States can use the Presidency to increase their influence on decision making, but it is unclear whether small State Presidencies are more influential than large State Presidencies (Warntjen, 2007). Maurer (2008) argued that large State Presidencies are the most successful, because they have more resources to employ labour-intensive methods, and they can function independently of the Council Secretariat. Bjurulf (2001), however, has claimed that small States can manage practical issues at least as effectively as large ones, because they are usually more motivated, have better contacts with the EU institutions and their relatively small administrations ensure an efficient flow of communication. The latter point has been challenged in a study on the Slovenian Presidency of 2008 (Kajnič and Svetličič, 2010), which showed that the intra- and inter-Ministerial cooperation is not always smooth in small States. Others have argued that small State Presidencies are often more successful because they are good alliance builders (Quaglia and Moxon-Browne, 2006) and benefit from an honest broker reputation (Vanhoonacker *et al.*, 2010).

Third, the role of the *domestic political and administrative context* is inconclusive. Effective intra- and inter-Ministerial coordination and involvement of all relevant levels are found to contribute to influence (Bunse, 2009) or success (Van Hecke and Bursens, 2011; Kassim *et al.*, 2000; Drieskens, 2011). Yet, there is no agreement on the effect of the strength and stability of the Government on Presidency success. Dierckx and Vermeersch, contributors to Van Hecke and Bursens' edited volume, assert that the poorly structured preparations and the missed opportunities in social policies during the Belgian Presidency were due to the absence of a Government: there were too many uncertainties and the Ministers had a lack of democratic legitimacy. However, Van Hecke and Bursens, supported by others (for example, De Ville *et al.*, 2011), contradict this statement: if all levels of decision making are actively involved and there is a national pro-European consensus, having a weak or caretaker Government can even be positive for Presidency success, because Ministers are less concerned with domestic politics and have more time for EU matters.

The literature is also divided on the third category of conditions, which are issue-specific or related to policy areas. The effect of the *voting method* is one such issue. According to Van Hecke and Bursens, it is easier to be successful in policy areas where Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) applies: the Presidency can use the 'shadow of the vote' to speed up decision making. Opponents of a certain decision mostly agree with a compromise they do not like rather than being defeated in a vote, because there is a strong consensus climate in the Council. Paradoxically, Bunse invokes precisely this consensus climate for her argument that the voting method does not make a big difference in practice. Indeed, the chair usually adopts decisions only if there is a broad consensus

among the Member States, even if a QMV would legally be enough. Nevertheless, several other studies (Elgström, 2006; Tallberg, 2006a; Warntjen, 2007; Tallberg, 2010) have pointed out that Presidencies have more influence on decisions taken by QMV than when unanimity is required. The voting method as a condition for Presidency performance has become less relevant under the Lisbon Treaty: most policy areas are now decided by QMV. Finding an agreement with the European Parliament, which is co-legislator in an increasing amount of policy areas, may become more challenging than brokering a Council position.

Also the *distribution and intensity of preferences* may have an impact on Presidency performance. Bunse argues that *heterogeneity* of preferences in the Council as such does not prevent the Presidency to exert influence. If the other delegations' preferences are not very *intense*, the Presidency can employ this heterogeneity to build a consensus around a compromise close to its own position, provided that there is no coalition of large Member States against this proposal. Thomson (2008) concludes that Presidencies with relatively *extreme* positions have more influence on (QMV) decision outcomes than other Member States. Bjurulf and Elgström (2004) have found that, if the positions of different institutions *diverge*, a skilful chair can take benefit from this situation and link compromises to its own preferences. Warntjen (2007) has focused on preference *intensity*: he found that high importance of a policy area for the Presidency leads to increased legislative activity, and concluded that the Presidency steers the legislative agenda. Schalk *et al* (2007) even note an increased Presidency influence on the contents of decisions in issues that are particularly *salient* to the chair. However, Van Hecke and Bursens, who study success, are more sceptical about the positive effect of heterogeneous preferences and/or high salience of certain issues for the Presidency. They conclude that diverging preferences in the Council, or between the European Parliament and the Council, makes the adoption of legislation – and thus Presidency success – more difficult.

A third issue-specific condition shaping the Presidency's abilities for influence and success is the *stage in the legislative process*. A number of studies (Bjurulf and Elgström, 2004; Schalk *et al*, 2007; Thomson, 2008; Warntjen, 2008) have shown that decision outcomes are relatively closer to the Presidency's preferences than to other Member States when a final decision is taken during the incumbent's term in office. The chair has more influence at the end of a legislative process than at other stages, but it usually has little influence on the timing of decision making (Bjurulf, 2001, p. 24). Van Hecke and Bursens briefly note a lack of time as one of the reasons for Belgian failure in some dossiers, but they do not formulate a precise conclusion on how the stage in the legislative process would determine Presidency success.

In sum, there is consensus in the literature on the effect of the external context, preparations, the gravity centre of Presidency management and reputation.

On other conditions, diverging conclusions have been reached. Good networks generally promote influence and success, whereas ‘too’ close relations with the Secretariat may limit influence. The unanimity rule seems to impede success, but may be less relevant for influence. Towards the end of legislative processes, the Presidency becomes more influential, whereas the effect of timing on success is inconclusive – which is unsurprising, as this depends on how success is defined. Diverging preferences in the Council and/or between the institutions can increase the influence of the Presidency, while such a situation mostly hampers Presidency success. It is obvious that certain conditions have a different effect, depending on the influence/success approach. But also within those approaches, there is no consensus on all conditions. It is still unclear whether the incumbent’s size affects its capacity to exert influence or be successful. Also the impact of the domestic political situation on Presidency success remains unclear, and was even found to diverge across the edited volume by Van Hecke and Bursens.

Conclusions

As highlighted in Charly and Mangenot, the roles of the rotating Presidency have significantly changed over the last decades; the Presidency now is a crucial actor in EU policymaking. The literature has evolved together with the growing importance of the Presidency, from mere descriptions and analyses of the ‘results’ to theory-based and often comparative studies of specific questions. However, there are still a number of blank spots, including the levels on which the Presidency can be relevant, the kind of policies where the Presidency plays a role, and comparisons between the Presidencies of new and old or between large and small Member States. Another question to be dealt with is about the relation between the different configurations and policy levels, and the possible roles of the Presidency beyond the formal and legal framework.

In addition, existing studies on Presidency performance display a couple of shortcomings, which should be addressed.

First, there is a lack of clarity on the concepts of influence and success. Studies on Presidency influence discuss how and to what extent the incumbent employs its responsibilities to shape EU policies in line with its own preferences. Research on Presidency success takes a broader approach, evaluating indicators such as priority realization, legislative output, norm-guided behaviour of the Presidency, the adequateness of the role(s) played and contributions to European integration. As the influence/success approach partially affects the research results, the starting point should be clarified.

Second, more systematic and comparative research is needed in order to elucidate the effect of certain conditions for Presidency performance – not only

between, but also within the influence and success approaches. The use of (combinations of) methods that discern causal complexity would be a substantial contribution to our understanding of the nature and origins of Presidency performance.

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