Explaining the Impact of Jacques Delors: Conceptualizing and Assessing the Commission Presidency

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the Presidency of the European Commission as a political leadership position. It
does so on three levels. First, it considers the relational nature of leadership, arguing that every
leadership position is shaped by its 'relationship network' - the relationships of the leader with his
constituents, co-actors, and subordinates. Second, it develops a typology of leadership styles, that
Commission Presidents might exercise within the limits of the Commission Presidency's highly
constraining relationship network. The three main types (neo-functionalist, federalist and
intergovernmentalist) integrate integration theory literature with existing knowledge of the activities of
Commission Presidents. Third, these ideas, and a personality-assessment-at-a-distance technique, are
employed in a case-study of Jacques Delors. The study shows that Delors' leadership cannot be
understood in simple Euro-federalist terms. It also shows the ability of the concepts and methods used
to advance comparative study of the Commission Presidency.

Introduction

Political leadership is both a subject of widespread fascination and a poorly understood phenomonen.
In this respect, studies of the European Union (EU) are no exception. With recent advances in
European integration, greater attention has been given to the role of the President of the European
Commission, and the potential importance of the Commission Presidency to the Union.1 Yet the
leadership of Commission Presidents remains little understood, and rarely studied outside the specific
context of the Presidency of Jacques Delors. The end of the Delors Presidency provides an appropriate
moment to 'step back' and consider the leadership of Commission Presidents.
This paper contributes to the study of the Commission Presidency by addressing the essential concepts
which such study must be based upon. It does so in three sections. The first focuses on political
leadership as a general phenomonen. I note that political leadership is inherently 'relational': that the
notion of leadership cannot make sense outside of a relationship between 'leader' and 'led'. This is
important not only for our basic understanding of leadership, but because it has implications for
comparative assessment of leadership positions. 'Leader-led' interactions can be disaggregated into
three distinct relationships, which together form a 'relationship network'. The particular status of the
Commission Presidency's 'relationship network' is contrasted to those of other leadership positions, to
help us understand the leadership potential, and the constraints, of the Commission Presidency.
Next, I construct a typology of leadership styles that Commission Presidents might exercise within
these general constraints. The three types developed (Neo-Functionalist, Federalist and

Intergovernmentalist) draw on existing integration theory literature to indicate plausible alternative paths for Commission Presidency leadership.
    FIGURE 1
(Sources: Indexes for respective publications)

The third section applies the typology, using a psychological Assessment-at-a-Distance technique, to a case-study of Jacques Delors. The study shows that Delors' leadership cannot be understood in simple 'Euro-Federalist' terms: more subtle characterizations must be employed. I conclude by arguing that the approach advocated here will not only help us better understand the impact of Delors, but also form a sounder basis for comparative studies - between different Commission Presidents, and between the leadership of Commission Presidents and that of other political leadership positions.

Section One: Conceptualizing the Commision Presidency as a Leadership Role.

Leadership as a Relational Phenomenon

The literature on political leadership is considerable - on 'leadership' more broadly defined, truly vast. Yet it is a literature more notable for disagreement and lack of progress than almost anything else - evidenced by the fact that some authors still debate basic 'framework construction' for leadership study.[2] Inasmuch as there is agreement on anything in the literature, however, it is that leadership is a 'relational phenomonen'.[3] Put simply, this involves the notion that one cannot discuss 'leadership' outside of its relationship with those who are 'led': "Leadership and Followership are linked concepts, neither of which can be understood without understanding the other".[4] Any leadership study, therefore, begins with the simple question of "who is leading whom from where to where".[5]
The idea of leadership as relational has generally been used to downplay the possibility of making general statements about leadership, and to explain the inability of scholars to find leadership attributes that apply across a multitude of settings.[6] 'Relational' leadership suggests that it is the context of the specific situation, and most particularly the needs of the led, that determine what type of leadership attributes are effective. This implies a need to move directly into empirical investigation of the context of leadership, to answer the 'who', 'who', 'where' and 'where' questions.[7]
    While accepting the basic notion of leadership as relational, I contend that this insight has been insufficiently exploited for the study of political leadership. This is because the simple 'leader-led' categorization has been retained in studies of leadership.[8] This prevents us from understanding that there are three distinct political roles that are played by those classified together as 'led': those of 'constituent', 'subordinate', and 'co-actor'; and that, consequently, three different relationships exist with leaders.[9] I argue that the status of a leadership position on these three relationships allows us to explain a substantial amount about the potential and constraints of that position.
    Leader-constituent relations involve the leader in interaction with those who are responsible for the leader continuing to occupy the leadership position. While the constituent role may be virtually defunct in absolute dictatorships, in the long-run there are few, if any, political leaders who can feel absolutely secure from the need to satisfy some constituency of support, even if such a group is rather narrowly drawn. Leader-Co-actor relations involve the leader and those others who must be involved for the collectivity to actually get anything done.[10] While co-actors may vary from issue to issue, there are also likely to be generally significant co-actors for any leadership position. Leader-subordinate relations involve the leader and those whom the leader is generally able to compel (rather than have to persuade) to do things.[11]
   The fact that these three roles have traditionally been conflated into a single 'leader-led' category appears largely due to much leadership research originating in social psychological study of small groups (such as gangs)[12], where the three roles are generally performed by the same people - the constituents are also the co-actors and subordinates. Disaggregating the leader-led relationship into the three discussed here is important, however, for what it can tell us about a political leadership position.
    To understand this, we must consider three questions, one relating to each of the three relationships. The first of these refers to the scope of the leader-subordinate relationship. Are the leader's subordinates also significant co-actors? Other things being equal, a leader who possesses at

least some ability to compel (or ability to replace in the absence of compliance) a substantial proportion of those whom they need to take action, should be able to exercise more decisive leadership13 than a leader whose subordinates only form a insignificant part of those needed as co-actors. Put simply, I assume that compulsion is easier than persuasion.

The second question refers to the scope of the leader-constituent relationship. Is there a substantial overlap between constituents and co-actors? A greater overlap suggests that the leader will need to exercise greater caution, and be more sensitive to the views of constituents when exercising leadership: for fear that the constituents may seek the removal of the leader.14

The third question refers to the scope of the leader:co-actor relationship. Does the leader need to mobilise many co-actors to actually get anything done? The greater the number of seperate actors that must be involved to achieve anything, the more difficult it should be for leadership to be exercised.

Together, the three relationships form what I term a 'relationship network': the collection of relationships within which the holder of a leadership position must operate. The answers to the three questions above determine the sort of relationship network that an office-holder is placed within. If, for example, the leader has few subordinates who are important co-actors, a high degree of constituent co-actor overlap, and must work through many necessary co-actors, then they are clearly operating in a highly constraining leadership position - with obvious implications for the degree of leadership they are able to exert.

The Commission Presidency as a Relationship Network

I shall now apply the relationship network idea to the Commission Presidency. The primary constituency for the Commission Presidency is the governments of the member states - who must agree unanimously on the appointment of the President, have the potential (though as yet unrealised), to replace him halfway through his term and whose unanimous approval will again be required if the President seeks re-appointment.15 The European Parliament has, of course, increased in importance as a secondary constituency as a result of the Maastricht Treaty - gaining the right to approve the person nominated as President by the national governments (and the new Commission as a whole), and retaining the ability to dismiss the entire Commission.16

The Commission President's list of co-actors includes virtually all the major interests within the EU - his Commission colleagues, other elements of the 'Brussels bureacracy' (his own staff to a limited degree, but also COREPER, and the Council Secretariat), the Parliament and, of course the national governments. The Commission Presidents' subordinates, however, are considerably fewer in number: they comprise principally his own staff, led by the Cabinet.17

The implications of the relationhip network which the Commission President finds himself within are set out in table 1. Here, I compare the Commission Presidency to two rather contrasting political leadership positions (The United States Presidency and the British Prime Ministership) in relation to the three questions detailed earlier:

TABLE 1

	³British Prime Minister	³U.S. President	³Commission ³President
1. Subordinate/ Co-Actor Overlap?	³Very Often - Co-Actors ³include Cabinet ³Ministers, personal staff ³and bureaucracy (all ³subordinates).	³Often - Can include Cabinet, ³personal staff and bureaucrats ³(subordinates), but may also ³include other political figures ³with own power base (eg. ³Congresssional leaders).	³Rarely - few ³subordinates. Most ³co-actors not ³subordinates.
2. Constituent/ Co-Actor Overlap?	³Moderate18 - exists ³somewhat among M.Ps, ³but not other main ³constituency - public.	³Low - Main constituency ³(public) has little co-actor ³capability.	³Quite High - Main ³elements of ³constituency ³(National gov. and

³   ³   ³EP) both important
³   ³   ³co-actors.
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3. Many Necessary   ³Not usually - policy   ³Sometimes (Varies by policy   ³Usually.
Co-Actors? ³control quite centralized. ³area - more so in Domestic   ³
³   ³policy than Foreign).   ³

As can be seen, the basic relationship network of the Commission President is a constraining one - particularly when compared to the other two leadership positions. This helps us to understand why - compared with other leadership positions - effective leadership in the office is so difficult, and why (despite the considerable qualities of many of the incumbents) effective Commission Presidency leadership has been so rare.

However, some means by which a Commission President can overcome or seek to improve on the constraints of his position are also suggested. Firstly, he can try to increase the level of subordinate-co-actor overlap, by bringing policies under his personal control. Jacques Delors was able to do this, to a limited extent, on the issue of Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) in the late 1980s:[19] resulting in his being able to exert considerable influence upon the direction of the EMU debate, and over the final outcome as reflected in the Maastricht Treaty.[20]   Second, the constraints of constituent-co-actor overlap could be diminished by a Commission President either making clear an indifference to the renewal of his term of office; or by winning powerful backers among the national governments, so that those less happy face a major dispute if they seek to replace the incumbent President. Delors seems to have practiced the second tactic to some effect, by winning the strong support of Chancellor Kohl.[21] However, a third possibility - limiting the number of significant co-actors - is probably not feasible for any Commision President. Delors seems not to have tried this option: indeed, in helping the European Parliament win 'co-decision' powers on much legislation in the Maastricht Treaty, he helped add to the number of relevant actors (albeit, adding another generally pro-integration one).

In summary, the Commission Presidency, like all political leadership positions, is involved in a network of relationships that do much to define the leadership potential of the position. The relationship network of Commission Presidents is a highly constraining one: nonetheless, there is some room for manoeuver, as demonstrated by Jacques Delors.

Section Two: A typology of Commission Presidency leadership

Thinking in terms of a relationship network tells us much about the process of leadership: specifically, the ability of an incumbent to be able to exercise leadership. But the major weakness of such an approach is that, by itself, it tells us little about the direction, or focus of leadership - the content of what a leader is seeking to achieve. This section will describe a typology of Commission Presidency leadership which addresses this deficiency.

The basis for the typology is the existing normative and descriptive theoretical perspectives on European integration - neo-functionalism, federalism and intergovernmentalism.[22] In constructing the typology, these perspectives have been connected to existing knowledge regarding the main activities of Commission Presidents. Using existing integration theories as a starting point has at least two advantages. First, it allows one to develop analysis of the Commission Presidency that uses insights and suggestions already generated, rather than having to construct a framework entirely from the 'ground up'. Second, there is sufficient contrast between the three perspectives to allow for three types with rather different behavior patterns.

The aim of this typology is to set out plausible alternative paths that Commission Presidency leadership can take, and against which the actions of specific Commission Presidents can be compared. The point of constructing these leadership 'types' for Commission Presidents is not to engage in debate on the explanatory power of (for example) neo-functionalism, or (even less), the desirability of any particular route to integration. Nor is any Commission President expected to conform exactly to any one of these three 'ideals'. More simply, the aim should be to see, in any particular instance, whether and to what degree there are elements of neo-functionalist, federalist, and intergovernmentalist strategies in the actual leadership styles of Commission Presidents.

Existing literature suggests a number of leadership activities that Commission Presidents engage in. These include activities that are basically internal to the Commission - the personal control of particular policy areas and administrative sections, and the coordination of the Commissions activities and policy programme23; more external leadership includes representing the Commission in European Council meetings (and elsewhere), acting as a policy advocate with National governments, and as a facilitator of intergovernmental bargains.24

Neo-functionalists aim to further integration by encouraging progress on specific functional matters, and, through the process of 'linkage', generate a 'spillover' of cooperation, rather than confronting the integration issue with a more direct appeal to governments and publics. An ideal-typical neo-functionalist Commission President could be expected to concentrate less on open calls for integration to be advanced, and rather to focus on the technical policy issues of advancing integration, while downplaying the degree to which this was linked to long-term strategy. This suggests a high concentration on internal leadership activities, and a rather low-key strategy of external leadership. The federalist vision is much more about a 'Great Leap Forward' approach. A federalist Commission President could be expected to be much less concerned with technical details than with the broad picture - to concentrate activity mainly on governments and peoples, and the construction of European-level political institutions. This suggests a high-profile external leadership, but little attention to internal leadership. By some contrast, the intergovernmentalist vision sees European integration as best kept to the level of promoting cooperation between nation-states that must remain the most powerful actors. The ideal-type intergovernmentalist Commission President would focus on technical details only insofar as they impinged upon cooperative arrangements, and be concerned not with 'Great Leaps Forward' in integration, but rather with maintaining some harmony between differing national interests. This suggests concentration on external leadership, but in a rather more low-key manner than for the federalist type.25

Section Three: Assessing Jacques Delors

This section applies the typology developed above in a case-study of Jacques Delors. The study employs a psychological personality-assessment-at-a-distance technique for analysing Delors. The study aims to do two things: first, to advance our understanding of Delors himself; and second, to enhance our capacities for the comparative assessment of political leadership in general, and Commission Presidents in particular.

The analysis of political leadership is an even more daunting task than its conceptualization.26 The task is particularly difficult if we seek to explain, (rather than simply note the existence of), leadership, and if we seek to make valid comparisons across a number of different leaders. Most methods currently employed fall short on one or both of these criteria.

'Reputational' assessment has a long history in studies of power 27, and is used (at least implicitly) in our evaluations of leaders: eg. 'we know Jacques Delors is important because everyone says that he is'.28 Another, often similarly implicit, method is 'outcomes analysis': eg. 'we know that Jacques Delors is an effective leader because of his achievements...'.29 Neither of these methods, however, pass our first criterion. That is, they both offer highly useful evidence of the existence of effective leadership - particularly valued given the paucity of knowledge available about the inner politics of the EU. But they can do little to explain why leadership has been effective.

More promising, from this viewpoint, are participant-observer studies,30 and (to a somewhat lesser extent, given their often self-serving nature) memoir accounts by political insiders. These can often be extremely informative about both the style and substance of leadership behavior in specific cases.31 But by their very nature, such studies tend to be highly particularistic: thus making it very difficult to use them as the basis for any systematic comparisons.

This is where techniques like the at-a-distance one employed here have an advantage. They allow for systematic comparison, as they can feasibly be applied to all leaders and leadership positions.32 They also allow for a genuine advance in our understanding and explanation of leadership, by giving insight into a core element in an individual's leadership abilities - their personality.

The purpose behind psychological studies of leadership personality has been most clearly articulated by Fred Greenstein.33 He notes that individual leadership is clearly an important explanatory factor for political outcomes in many settings. To the degree that we believe there to have been high 'actor

indispensibility' (the outcome would not have been the same in the absence of the leader) in any situation, then it is important for scholars to discover what it was about the leader, in the relational context that they were operating in, that was behind their influence (for good or bad) on the outcome. Once we begin investigating the personal qualities behind leadership success, we clearly enter the realm of the psychological. This has long been considered one of the most difficult areas of investigation for students of politics, particularly given our inability to subject leaders to detailed clinical investigations.[34] In recent years, however, there has been considerable advance in at-a-distance techniques of assessment. These methods use unobtrusive measures of politically-relevant psychological characteristics, and have been demonstrated to have considerable validity and insight.[35] This section presents a study of Delors using an adapted version of the Hermann method for personality assessment at-a-distance.[36] This method uses as its data source the responses given by leaders in interviews,[37] which are examined for evidence of 8 personality traits which should be important to the behavior of political leaders: Nationalism (here defined as 'Euro-Federalism', or an attachment to the advance of integration; Belief in One's Ability to Control Events; Need for Power; Need for Affiliation (defined as "a concern for establishing, maintaining, or restoring warm and friendly relations with other persons or groups")[38]; Conceptual Complexity; Self-Confidence; Distrust of Others; and Task Orientation (that is, "a relative emphasis in interactions with others in getting the task done as opposed to focusing on the feelings and needs of others").[39] The method yields numerical scores for each trait. In analyzing the interview material, interest is less in the surface content of the material (except insofar as we must be aware of the context within which the leader is speaking), than in attempting to analyze the motives that lie behind this speech.

Table 2 shows how we can connect the 8 traits to the typology constructed in the previous section. While there may be some dispute about individual cells, the table matches up the types of leadership to the characteristics fairly well.

TABLE 2: Connections between Commission Presidents
by type, and adapted Hermann methodology
    Not Available

Thus, the technically-minded neo-functionalist type scores highly on conceptual complexity, where the federalist type - likely to gloss over finer details in favour of broad, sweeping appeals for European unity - scores much lower. A federalist scores highly on Nationalism/Euro-federalism, while an Intergovernmentalist scores highly on Affiliation need - reflecting their desire to encourage intergovernmental harmony in cooperation.

Table 3 reports scores for Delors on the eight characteristics, as well as standardized scores that allow for comparisons with two groups of other political leaders. The first column reports percentage scores, that are generally in agreement with what other accounts would lead one to expect of Delors: the importance of Euro-federalism, evidence of his being a complex thinker, and being highly motivated to achieve set tasks. This is encouraging, in providing yet further support for the validity of the techique. The second and third columns of the table demonstrate interesting scores for Delors when compared to people in other leadership settings. Relative to these other leaders (all heads of national governments), Delors shows a low ability to control events, and low self-confidence, a high need for power, and affiliation motive. This chimes well with the discussion of the first section, regarding the impact of the relationship network which a Commission President is placed within: compared to national leaders, the incumbent Commission President is placed in a highly constraining leadership position, from which it would be no surprise if they were left feeling rather impotent. They will likely desire greater power, to overcome this status, yet must continually bear in mind the need to maintain good relations with their numerous co-actors in order to actually achieve anything.

Also of interest are Delors' high level of distrust - which could be a peculiarity of Delors, or another outcome of the difficult position of the Commission President - and his astonishingly high score on the Nationalism/Euro-Federalism characteristic. This latter score suggests that Delors' appeals for European unity were far more open than the level of nationalism which other leaders generally allow themselves to exhibit.

Considering both the percentage and standardized scores in relation to the typology outlined in section 2, Delors exhibits traits consistent with a Federalist-type Commission President for the Nationalism/Euro-Federalism and Need for Power characteristics, but he is more consistent with the Intergovernmental ideal on Need for Affiliation, ability to control events, distrust of others, and self-confidence, and with the Neo-Funtionalist type on conceptual complexity and task orientation.

TABLE 3

Personal Characteristics	Overall Score 40	Comparison with 53 World Leaders 41	Comparison with 8 West European Leaders
Nationalism/Euro-Federalism	50.5%	86.5 (.10)	148.8 (.04)
Ability to Control Events	38.8%	38.8 (.18)	39.4 (.18)
Need for Power	48.2%	75.6 (.11)	70.9 (.13)
Need for Affiliation	25.4%	76.3 (.07)	62.8 (.12)
Conceptual Complexity	48.3%	59.4 (.12)	64.1 (.08)
Self-Confidence	37.4%	14.6 (.15)	23.8 (.17)
Distrust of Others	31.6%	61.1 (.14)	83.7 (.07)
Task orientation	57.3%	44.9 (.13)	42.3 (.10)

(N=51).42

In other words, the pattern is clearly a mixture of the traits of different ideals of Commission Presidency leadership. The results suggest that while Delors certainly had federalist ambitions for the EU, there were also distinct elements of neo-functionalism in his methods, while the constraints of the Commission Presidency ensured that he, like any incumbent, had to remain sensitive to intergovernmental considerations, despite not sharing the ultimate goals of the intergovernmentalist vision.

Table 4 shows further interesting results for Delors, where scores have been reported for interview responses along different issue-areas. The table confirms Delors' confidence on technical matters of policy, and shows him to be notably context-sensitive, being far more likely to strike a Euro-federalist tone when discussing broader issues.

TABLE 4: By Subject 43

Personal Characteristic	(N=23) Pool 1	(N=10) Pool 2	(N=18) Pool 3
Nationalism/Euro-Federalism	52.5%	43.8%	51.3%
Ability to Control Events	37.0%	55.7%	32.1%

Need for Power   ³48.6% ³57.9% ³42.1%
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Need for Affiliation   ³21.8% ³32.9% ³25.2%
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Conceptual Complexity   ³46.7% ³53.6% ³47.4%
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Self-Confidence   ³41.3% ³60.0% ³26.4%
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Distrust of Others   ³28.6% ³31.3% ³34.6%
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Task Orientation   ³62.3% ³65.9% ³45.6%

It is not surprising, therefore, that Delors' more high-profile stance on European unity only emerged from the late 1980s, when the success of Delors' early, more technical initiatives raised the broader matters of monetary and political union.

Assessment-at-a-distance methods open up new and exciting opportunities for the study of the Commission Presidency. This is not to claim that they represent a 'magic key', unlocking hitherto entirely undiscovered insights into the personalities of public figures. As good, if not better isights into a leader may be gained from a prolonged close period of observation. Nonetheless, the technique reported here does allow for insight into those aspects of a leader's personality believed to have an influence on leadership behavior. Delors has been found to exhibit characteristics clearly beyond those of an ideal-type federalist Commission President. In fact, although demonstrating federalist goals, the results suggest his mode of operation as being more closely related to the neo-functionalist and intergovernmentalist types.

Where these methods are particularly useful in that they can be applied to all leaders on an equal basis, thus facilitating the systematic comparison of leader'spersonalities and their impact on leadership behavior.44

Conclusion

This paper has explored the Commission Presidency at 3 levels - as a leadership position compared to others; in terms of alternative types of leadership within that position; and in an individual analysis of Delors. I contend that if the impact of a leader like Delors is to be explained, then we must be able to understand the Commission Presidency at all three levels. A full explanation must attempt to incorporate the relational constraints that a leader operates within, the broad strategies available to them, and the importance of their personal characteristics. To this end, the paper has attempted to advance our thinking on all 3 fronts. It has laid out the implications for the Commission Presidency of its' 'relational network'; indicated how integration theories may be interpreted as alternative Commission Presidency leadership styles; and have also demonstated the usefulness of a personality assessment-at-a-distance technique. Thus, it has attended to both the conceptual and methodological tools necessary for developing comparative analysis of Commission Presidents.

The need now is for further work utilizing these tools, to help us more fully understand the Commission Presidency, by speaking to the following questions: Is there a best, or most effective, style of Commission Presidency leadership? Why has Delors apparently been so much more successful than almost all his predecessors? Are there systematic differences in the leadership of Commission Presidents to that of leaders in other types of setting? It is towards answering these questions, and ultimately a more systematic understanding of the Commission Presidency, that this paper has sought to contribute.

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