Prime Ministers in Europe
Changing Career Experiences and Profiles

Ferdinand Müller-Rommel
Michelangelo Vercesi
Jan Berz

Palgrave Studies in Political Leadership

Series Editors
Ludger Helms
University of Innsbruck
Innsbruck, Austria

Gillian Peele
Department of Politics and International Relations
University of Oxford
Oxford, UK

Bert A. Rockman
Department of Political Science
Purdue University
West Lafayette, IN, USA

Palgrave Studies in Political Leadership seeks to gather some of the best work on political leadership broadly defined, stretching from classical areas such as executive, legislative and party leadership to understudied manifestations of political leadership beyond the state. Edited by an international board of distinguished leadership scholars from the United States, Europe and Asia, the series publishes cutting-edge research that reaches out to a global readership. The editors are gratefully supported by an advisory board comprising of: Takashi Inoguchi (University of Tokyo, Japan), R.A.W Rhodes (University of Southampton, UK) and Ferdinand Müller-Rommel (University of Luneburg, Germany).

More information about this series at

Ferdinand Müller-Rommel
Michelangelo Vercesi • Jan Berz

Prime Ministers in Europe

Changing Career Experiences and Profiles

palgrave
macmillan

Ferdinand Müller-Rommel
Center for the Study of Democracy
Leuphana University Lüneburg
Lüneburg, Germany

Michelangelo Vercesi
Center for the Study of Democracy
Leuphana University Lüneburg
Lüneburg, Germany

Jan Berz
Department of Political Science
Trinity College Dublin
Dublin, Ireland

Cover image: © Dutchy / Getty Images

To Jean Blondel
a highly respected scholar, mentor, and friend

Foreword

Every professional or non-professional observer of political life has little doubt about the importance of prime ministers in the parliamentary or semi-presidential regimes typical of Europe (but not only). Prime ministers, their actions and declarations, their tweets are almost daily at the center of media attention. Who they are, where they come from, and how successful their conduct of government affairs is are the objects of constant discussion. It is a bit surprising therefore that political scientists have devoted much less systematic attention to these figures. Is it the fear to be not sufficiently scientific by taking a personalistic view of politics instead of adopting a more structural vision? Is it because prevailing research frameworks do not have a well-defined place for these political figures? Whatever the reason for this, there is obviously a disturbing gap in our knowledge. It is therefore good news that a book devoted entirely to the analysis of these political figures should be published. And it is also good news that the book should be based on solid and systematic empirical evidence and on a well-articulated theoretical perspective.

Ferdinand Müller-Rommel, with a long scholarly experience in the study of governments, and the two younger coauthors, Michelangelo Vercesi and Jan Berz, put straightforwardly at the center of this book the question: who are the European prime ministers? And this question, to make it even more relevant, is nested in the wider perspective of party government, the dominant although today somewhat more uncertain variant of democracy in the European context. What is then the relationship between prime ministers and parties and what prime ministers' profiles can tell us about the role of the latter in a central democratic institution

as the government? By raising these questions, the three authors make this book as an important contribution not only to our knowledge about crucial policy-makers as prime ministers are but also to the ongoing scholarly debate about the decline (or transformation) of party government.

Exploiting the first systematic collection of biographical data for 350 prime ministers in 26 European countries the book cannot only provide an average profile of these political figures but also document variations across groups of countries and over time of this profile.

Throughout the chapters of the book, we come to know who the prime ministers of Europe are in terms of their gender, age when coming into office, education, occupational background, and political positions occupied in parliament, cabinet, or party office. We are led to appreciate the differences in background patterns between three main groups of European countries, those with a democratic experience dating to the first years after the Second World War, the Southern European countries who democratized in the mid-1970s, and the large Central and Eastern European set of countries who became democratic between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. This articulation of the analysis already provides important hints about the impact of historical periods on the shaping of prime ministerial careers; but in a following step the book, further pursuing this theme, explores variations by decades of all the main features of prime ministers.

This rich and systematic descriptive analysis provides an interesting starting point for a more theoretically articulate discussion of some important trends of political change: populism, technocracy, and presidentialization of executive office. Although the book does not directly produce a causal analysis of the relationship between these trends and the profile of prime ministers, it provides a very important starting point for developing further research along these lines.

It is fair to conclude that for all those who are convinced that prime ministers are among the most important political players in today's world this book is a must.

Florence, Italy   Maurizio Cotta

Preface

Insofar as party governments matter, prime ministers do too. They are among the best-known politicians in parliamentary and semi-presidential democracies. Their political and private lives are under constant media scrutiny. They are featured almost daily in the print and online media. Their hours worked, their regular participation in events, as well as the speeches and interviews they give seem innumerable. As a result, the large majority of voters view prime ministers as the politically most powerful government officials. This public opinion corresponds impressively with the scholarly debate about the empowerment of prime ministers in parliamentary democracies, which has come to be associated with the 'personalization' and 'presidentialization' of politics. Both concepts imply directly or indirectly that prime ministers with a technical background—rather than traditional 'partisan prime ministers'—are more likely to hold the highest executive position in parliamentary and semi-presidential governments of the twenty-first century. It therefore seems reasonable to argue that in contemporary governments, the career profiles of chief executives are slowly changing.

This book assesses how the career experiences and the career profiles of the 350 prime ministers who governed more than 400 million citizens in 26 European liberal democracies between the years 1945 and 2020 have changed over time and across countries. We want to know who these prime ministers are, what their individual background characteristics were prior to entering office, as well as when and where their career profiles shifted from partisan to technical types over the past seven decades.

This volume is a product of a close academic collaboration between three political scientists who are at different stages in their academic career. Together, they have a common interest in the study of prime ministers. The origin of this book goes back to many discussions we had with Jean Blondel who made us aware that there is—most surprisingly—very little scholarly interest in studying prime ministers from liberal democracies outside of Westminster systems. Consequently, he proposed to bring prime ministers 'back in' to the study of comparative government. Following his advice, we decided to examine the changing role of European prime ministers in times of declining party government. This book therefore provides rigorous descriptive findings about the consequences, and the implications, of declining party governments on the career patterns of prime ministers in Western, Southern, and Central-Eastern Europe.

At Palgrave Macmillan we had the pleasure of working with Ambra Finotello and her colleagues, who provided guidance and continuous support throughout the entire project. We are also indebted to Ludger Helms, and the editors of the *Palgrave Studies in Political Leadership*, for having included this book in their series.

Our greatest appreciation, however, goes to Jean Blondel whose books, including *World Leaders*, *Government Ministers in the Contemporary World*, and *The Profession of Government Ministers in Western Europe*, as well as his personal scholarly support over many years, have greatly inspired this comparative analysis of prime ministers in the 'new' Europe. The book is therefore dedicated to him.

Lüneburg, Germany	Ferdinand Müller-Rommel
Lüneburg, Germany	Michelangelo Vercesi
Dublin, Ireland	Jan Berz
February 2022	

CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

List of Tables

Studying Prime Ministers' Careers: An Introduction

On May 17, 2016, the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) appointed Christian Kern as chancellor. Kern, who remained in office until December 2017, was an unusual figure in the history of Austrian party government. After graduating with a degree in journalism and communication, Kern worked for three years as a business journalist and for another three years as assistant to the Federal Chancellery's secretary of state, Peter Kostelka. In 1994 he became the spokesman for the SPÖ's parliamentary leader. After another three years, Kern began a successful career in business for the *Verbund AG*, the largest electricity supplier in Austria. In 2009, he became a board member of the football club Austria Vienna; in 2010, he took over as CEO of the public Austrian Federal Railways (ÖBB); and, in 2014, he was appointed chairman of the Community of European Railway and Infrastructure Companies (CER). When Chancellor Faymann (SPÖ) resigned due to his party's poor performance in the 2016 Austrian presidential election, the Social Democratic Party selected Kern to be the new head of government and its party leader.

Although Christian Kern did have a party affiliation and spent part of his career in close contact with politics, his professional profile tended

---

The original version of this chapter was revised. The correction to this chapter can be found at https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-90891-1_7

toward that of a business manager at the time of his investiture. Kern neither fit the ideal-type of a technocratic prime minister, devoid of political experience, nor did he match the career model of a typical, partisan prime minister, who gained extensive experience in parliament, in cabinet, or as party head, prior to entering office. In fact, Kern was an atypical, but appealing, party member whose main professional experiences were gathered outside of politics.

What explains the nomination of Christian Kern as prime minister? We argue in this book that something new is happening in the selection of prime ministers in European liberal democracies. In the 'golden age' of party government between the 1950s and 1970s, political parties were the most influential political organizations for mobilizing and representing citizens. For about 30 years, they held a firm grasp on all aspects of the democratic process. During these years, prime ministers were mainly *Berufspolitiker* (Weber, 1919), a term later adopted in political science by King (1981) as 'career politicians', who learned the craft of politics by acquiring expertise as professional government practitioners. These politicians bring with them experiences gained from political apprenticeships and politically adjacent occupations, such as journalism, public relations, and academia. They understand the intra-party, legislative, and cabinet rules and procedures. Most of them are disposed toward compromise and are able to make convincing political judgments (Allen et al., 2020). Political parties select these career politicians as prime ministers because of their reliability as party-agents. Thereby, their previous career positions in parliament, in government, and in the political party were seen as proxies for loyalty and competence that are valuable characteristics for being selected for the prime ministerial job.

Yet, as we will see below, between the 1970s and the 1980s, things started to change: social cleavages lost relevance as sources of political division and constituencies became less cohesive and more individualized. Furthermore, party identification and membership decreased while volatility and party system fragmentation increased (Casal Bértoa & Enyedi, 2021). As a result, the conditions for a well-functioning, party government declined (Mair, 2013, p. 65). Along with the eroding model of party government, new populist and technocratic demands for representation emerged in several European countries[1] (Bertsou & Pastorella, 2017).

At the same time, the pressure from an increasing internationalization of politics, defined by global governance through intergovernmental negotiations, shifted power away from parliament and single cabinet ministers toward government and prime ministers. The increasing demand for domestic and international policy coordination, as well as the growing

complexity and sectoral specialization within the center of government, has led to a substantial empowerment of prime ministers with managerial skills and a knowledge of special policy fields. Moreover, the emergence of new forms of mass communication and political participation, as well as the convergence of all major parties toward the 'ideological center' of politics, strengthened leadership-oriented party organizations, and as a result, led to a more personalized style of political representation among executives. Prime ministers not only received more political power but also became more prominent political figures within and outside of party politics, a development which scholars refer to as the 'presidentialization of politics' (Foley, 2000; Heffernan, 2005; Poguntke & Webb, 2005). Thus, the decline of party government as well as the new challenges presented by the presidentialization of politics made individual leaders more important relative to their party organizations. These new leaders transitioned from being dependent on their own party to taking over and becoming principals of their parties, exhibiting stronger leadership styles, a more prominent public image, and expertise in major policy areas.

Against this background, we argue that party demand for prime ministers' background characteristics have changed (Chap. 3) and that, over time, prime ministers have accumulated less political experience within national, party-based, political institutions and more technical experience outside of politics (Chap. 4). In addition, we claim that prime ministers' career profiles have moved from a 'party-agent' ideal-type to a 'party-principal' ideal-type (Chap. 5). These processes have affected older European democracies as well as countries in Southern and Central-Eastern Europe which democratized in the 1970s and 1990s. We wrote this book to provide empirical evidence for these conjectures.

The Political Role of Prime Ministers

The political role of prime ministers in liberal democracies has changed markedly over the past decades. In parliamentary democracies, prime ministers exercise public leadership and represent the government to citizens. Together with their cabinet ministers they are collectively responsible to the parliament, which has the power to execute a vote of no confidence between elections. Put differently, prime ministers are delegated by the assembly to lead the cabinet and its decision-making and, at the same time, they are held accountable to voters through both the parliament and the party that has nominated them. As pointed out by Strøm (2000), the prime minister lies at the crossroads of a complex institutional twine, which can be depicted like a chain of delegation with the shape of an

hourglass (turned horizontal). In this chain, 'representation begins with a multitude of principals (the citizens) and ends with a large number of agents (civil servants)'; the prime minister is the neck of the hourglass, who 'connects the elected representatives of the people and the administrators of the state' (Strøm, 2000, p. 270).

Very often, the prime minister is also the head of the political party and the leading candidate in electoral campaigns. Particularly in countries with single-member district electoral systems, the prime minister leads a single-party majority cabinet, for which she chooses the ministers and has the freedom to define governmental policy. Conversely, in consensus democracies where parliamentary seats are allocated proportionally, the prime minister fronts a coalition, and in some cases even a minority cabinet, where governmental decisions need to be continuously negotiated between coalition partners and the respective party leaders (Lijphart, 2012).

The responsibilities that a prime minister bears in the government, in the party, and in the country define the 'prime ministerial job' and constitute a litmus test for assessing prime ministerial performance (Weller, 1985, 2018). The prime minister has four main *delegated tasks* (Grotz et al., 2021, pp. 1915–1916). First, she resolves cabinet conflicts when ministers drift away from the governmental policy, either because they are defending competing departmental interests or because they are promoting the interests of their own party instead of the coalitional program (Andeweg, 2000). Second, the prime minister shapes public policy, ideally in a way that respects voters' preferences (Weller, 2014, p. 495). Third, she provides solutions to exogenous crises, which usually have a significant impact on the political system. These crises require the prime minister to make policy decisions intended to maximize collective benefits and minimize collective costs (Boin et al., 2012, pp. 121–122). Fourth, the prime minister speaks for the country and represents its national interests abroad. The prime minister is indeed an 'international ambassador' who operates globally and whose 'annual diary […] is shaped by a series of international meetings fixed long in advance' (Weller, 2014, p. 498).

In addition, the prime minister fulfills two *accountability tasks*, which include maintaining the support of the parliamentary majority and the endorsement of the political party. The risk of being 'dismissed' by one of these two entities is a powerful incentive to act responsibly toward citizens' demands (Grotz et al., 2021, p. 1911). Finally, in semi-presidential democracies, the prime minister must also cooperate with the elected

president, whose term in office is fixed[2] and whose party affiliation can be either the same as the prime minister's or different (Schleiter & Morgan-Jones, 2010, pp. 1423–1424; Grotz & Kukec, 2021, pp. 409–412).

One of the most vibrant scholarly discussions on this topic focuses on how the power of the prime ministerial office has increased over time. In particular, observers recognize that, over the years, prime ministers have gained political influence and responsibility while other cabinet members, and their parties, have been marginalized. This change has, in turn, made the prime minister's actions more consequential for democratic governance. The advocates of this argument highlight that the chief executive's position has undergone an 'institutional stretch' which endows the holder with new chances to control an increasing number of political decisions. Hennessy (2012), for instance, detects a continuous concentration of duties in the hands of the prime minister in the United Kingdom with no equivalent transfer of responsibility in the opposite direction (i.e., away from the prime minister). Overall, Hennessey calculates that the number of prerogatives supervised by the prime minister increased from 12 in the 1940s up to 47 in the 1990s (Hennessy, 2012, pp. 118–131). These 47 prerogatives can be grouped into six main fields of intervention: 'constitutional and procedural (10 duties); appointments (9); conduct of cabinet and parliamentary business (8); policy strategy and communications (3); organizational and efficiency questions (3); budget and market-sensitive questions (2); national security (8); and special personal responsibilities (4)' (Weller, 2018, p. 61).

On a more comparative basis, O'Malley proposes an expert-based estimation of the prime ministerial 'influence over the policy output of the government' (2007, p. 11). His findings show that, in fact, there has been growth in the ability of prime ministers to get their 'preferred policies accepted and enacted' and that this holds for several countries. In this context, a strand of the literature also claims that parliamentary democracies have witnessed a process of presidentialization (see Chap. 3), whereby prime ministers have become relatively similar to chief executives in presidential systems. In particular, it is argued that prime ministers become more autonomous from their parties when selecting their ministerial team and running their cabinets (Poguntke & Webb, 2005; Bäck et al., 2009). Other scholars have elaborated on this, arguing that prime ministers often turn into 'personal leaders' who govern using a more direct type of popular legitimation (Musella, 2018). In sum, these changes have enhanced prime ministers' influence over policy-making and agenda-setting power.

This observation applies to both Westminster democracies and coalition-based political systems (Poguntke & Webb, 2015; Martocchia Diodati et al., 2018).

Two 'mutually reinforcing phenomena' have particularly favored this evolution: the centralization of executive decision-making and the personalization of politics (Strangio et al., 2013, p. 10). The former refers to the shift of policy authority from the cabinet to the bureaucratic and personal offices that support the prime minister and thereby to a parallel reduction of ministerial and departmental power. Personalization, in turn, increases the visibility of prime ministers, who are constantly under the public spotlight and at the forefront of the political stage (Dowding, 2013, p. 625; Strangio et al., 2013, p. 10).

The centralization of administrative structures at the prime minister's disposal has led to an increase in the coordination capacity within national executives. As Peters et al. argue 'there has been a gradual accretion of power and responsibility towards the office of the chief executive, and also some apparent waning of the powers of other institutions' (2000, p. 265). Both the number of people specialized in advising and supporting the prime minister and the sum of financial resources available to prime ministerial staff have increased over time (Müller-Rommel, 2008). For example, the number of permanently employed experts who professionally manage the prime minister's public communication through the use of mass media has increased substantially over the past decades (Musella, 2018, pp. 105–106).

At the same time, personalization has made individual political actors more prominent, while collective, political entities have declined. Three types of personalization have affected the prime minister: institutional, media, and behavioral (Rahat & Kenig, 2018, p. 118 ff). Institutional personalization applies when rules emphasize the influence of the prime minister *vis-à-vis* other political collective actors (e.g., the cabinet or the political party). For instance, granting the prime minister more power in the selection of cabinet ministers or in the overall cabinet decision-making processes is considered as a form of institutional personalization. Second, contemporary mass media cover prime ministers and individual politicians more often than collective entities, such as parties or other political groupings. For example, Karvonen (2010, p. 89) observes a growing trend in the percentage of articles covering the incumbent prime minister by name or position in the British newspaper *The Times*. Higher levels of personalization in newspapers, radios, televisions, and informational websites have

become a common feature of advanced democracies (Rahat & Kenig, 2018, pp. 154–157). Third, behavioral personalization occurs when prime ministers move from being 'team players' who act together with party officials and cabinet members to 'separate politicians' with uncoordinated actions. The shift in prime ministers' behavior toward a 'centralized personalization' affects the electoral outcomes significantly because the choices of voters become increasingly driven by prime ministers' personal characteristics rather than by party politics (Garzia, 2014; Berz, 2019). Moreover, the centralized personalization of prime ministers can increase or decrease voter turnout for parliamentary elections, especially when the consumption of television is high (Ferreira da Silva et al., 2021).

In sum, the empirical evidence shows that the traditional tasks of prime ministers, that is, linking citizens' demands with governmental policy, remains the same, but their role in fulfilling these tasks, that is, their personal empowerment, changed over the past decades. The centralization of decision-making and the personalization of politics have deeply affected popular expectations about the prime ministers' role and their job in office. Prime ministers are increasingly recognized as drivers of decision-making in the heart of government and as the 'architects' of overall governmental policy. They carry out their office under the watchful eye of the citizen, who holds them accountable at the next elections. It is for this reason that prime ministers have strong personal incentives to handle their job successfully, thus enhancing their chances to stay in office for another term.

In this book, we claim that these popular expectations have a pronounced effect on the careers of prime ministers. The idea is simple: we argue that a career background in politics provides prime ministers with relevant skills and expertise to succeed while in office. If prime ministers are expected to fulfill new functions or to fulfill old functions in new institutional settings, then they need congruent experience and adequate skills. Put differently, new job descriptions require new political expertise. Thus, we expect the career experiences and profiles of prime ministers to change in times of changing job requirements, accordingly.

Why Study Prime Ministers' Careers?

Prime ministers are the most powerful and prestigious politicians in parliamentary democracies. They are major political decision-makers and administrators whose activities affect the public life of the entire country.