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Observations on an under-researched relationship

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Abstract

The Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg are well-known cases of consensus politics. Traditionally, decision-making in the Low Countries has been characterized by broad involvement, power sharing and making compromises. These countries were also founding member states of the European Union (EU) and its predecessors. However, the relationship between European integration and the tradition of domestic consensus politics remains unclear. In order to explore this relationship this paper presents the conceptual framework and a short summary of the recently published book *European Integration and Consensus Politics in the Low Countries* (edited by Hans Vollaard, Jan Beyers and Patrick Dumont; Routledge). The authors discuss how consensus politics would shape the impact of European integration. They also analyse whether European integration may undermine the fundamental characteristics of consensus politics in the Low Countries. Drawing on consociationalism and Europeanization research, they provide a comprehensive overview of Europeanization in the three Low Countries as well as a better understanding of the varieties of consensus politics across and within these countries. In doing this they refer to a wide range of in-depth studies on a variety of political actors such as governments, parliaments, political parties, courts, ministries and interest groups as well as key policy issues such as the ratification of EU treaties and migration policy. Their most important observation is that European integration has changed the substance of consensus politics in some policy-areas, but barely the domestic political practice itself.

Keywords

Consensus Politics, Consociationalism, European integration, Europeanization, Low Countries

Investigating the relationship between European integration and consensus politics

After the national elections of 2007, Belgium had to wait 194 days before a new coalition government took office. Many observers pointed at the linguistic divide between the French-speaking and Dutch-speaking communities and the tensions between the Left and the Right in Wallonia to explain the lengthy process of coalition formation. Narrowly involved with the creation of the government, Herman van Rompuy, the former president of the European Council, also cited as a factor Belgium's membership of the European Union (EU), and more specifically the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). In his view, the creation of the euro has had the result that domestic political instability no longer immediately impacts on the exchange rate of national currencies, which decreases the pressure on domestic politicians to quickly create stable coalitions (*De Standaard* 2007).

Van Rompuy's observation clearly illustrates how European integration may have impacted the practices of sharing power and making compromises in Belgium. A similar impact may also have occurred for its neighbours Luxembourg and the Netherlands, countries with a comparable tradition of consensus politics. This tradition does not mean that the three Low Countries have been free of political crisis, conflict and competition. To the contrary, the public financing of religious schools, foreign policy, the monarchy, language, nuclear weaponry, and welfare state politics have all been reasons for major confrontations, political instability and stalemates. What makes the Low Countries cases of consensual political systems is, instead, how they usually deal with political disagreement and conflict. Basically, they feature political institutions and practices of power sharing and making compromises to avoid decision-making by simple majority (Andeweg 2000, 511).

In addition to the example above, European integration may have undermined consensus politics in the Low Countries in other ways, however. The transfer of national competences to the EU may have made it more difficult to come to satisfactory deals, as it has decreased the scope for establishing domestic bargains. For example, the budget rules within the EMU make side-payments to alleviate domestic opposition more difficult. The open borders in the EU's internal market also allow business interests to move abroad to circumvent domestic compromises that implement regulations which constrain business operations. Meanwhile, the free movement of labour may have fostered migration waves – for example, from Southern and Eastern Europe – and engendered political conflicts on migration that complicate consensus building and power sharing among political elites. Yet, European integration may not only have had a weakening influence on domestic consensus politics. The technocratic nature of decision-making in the European Union may, for instance, have eased the making of compromises, because it can depoliticize domestic political clashes on sensitive issues such as cutting down public deficits and reforming the welfare state. Nonetheless, the EMU has not secured Belgium's monetary stability fully, as rising interest rates for its high public debt urged political parties in 2011 – in the midst of the Euro debt crises - to cobble together a coalition after the lengthiest government formation process ever (Van Aelst and Louwerse 2014).

The relationship between European integration and the tradition of domestic consensus politics thus remains unclear. Surprisingly, the study of this relationship is still in its infancy, even in consensus democracies such as Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg that were founding members of the EU and its predecessors. This also holds for how domestic consensus politics filters the impact of European integration on the member states. The recently published volume – *European Integration and Consensus Politics in the Low*

Countries – seeks to fill the scholarly void on the relation between European integration and domestic consensus politics (Vollaard et al. 2015). This EUI-paper presents a slightly revised version of the volume’s introduction.¹ The Low Countries provide an excellent starting point to explore how European integration and consensus politics are related, more in particular how the response of these small polities to European integration has been shaped by their consensual nature, and how European integration has transformed consensual politics. This focus fits well with the growing attention in the Europeanization literature to the adaptation of more structural features of domestic politics to European integration in addition to policy changes. The in-depth exploration in the volume is also of added value to the scholarly literature on Europeanization which has mainly focused on the larger member states, and tends to ignore that most Europeans live in small states and that most of the EU member states are small states. Particularly, a comprehensive overview of the Europeanization of the Low Countries is still missing (though see Jones 2005 for a concise impression).

Two questions guide our exploration of the relationship between European integration and consensus politics in the Low Countries: (1) How has consensus politics affected the way in which the Low Countries have adapted to the process of European integration? And (2), has the process of European integration affected consensus politics in the Low Countries? The next three sections outline the key concepts—consensus politics, European integration and Europeanization—and how they may be related to show how the volume contributes to the literature on consensus politics and European integration, respectively. The fifth section provides an overview of the (methodological) set-up of the overall project. We conclude with a short overview of the main findings on how consensus politics may have shaped Europeanization and how European integration may have shaped consensus politics itself.

A refined understanding of consensus politics

In the 1960s, consensus politics started to receive considerable attention when scholars tried to understand political stability in fragmented West European democracies, such as the Netherlands and Belgium. Why did entrenched cleavages not lead to civil war or violent political conflicts as in the case of the Weimar Republic? According to the most prominent scholar of consensus politics Arend Lijphart (1975), the leaders of the religious and socio-economic subcultures accommodated the potentially disruptive tensions by cooperating according to diplomacy-like informal rules of the game. Lijphart used the concept of “consociational democracy” to describe this combination of segmented masses and elite cooperation. Later on, Lijphart applied the predominantly institutional characteristics of executive power-sharing in grand coalitions, a high degree of autonomy for the subcultures, proportionality, and minority vetoes to determine instances of consociational democracies. Both the informal rules and the institutional characteristics of consensus polities boil down to “eschew[ing] decision-making by majority” (Andeweg 2000, 511). Consensus politics can and does also exist in democratic societies without deep divisions in so-called consensus democracies (Lijphart 1999; 2008). The concept of consensus democracy refers to institutional arrangements “that broaden the involvement in decision making as widely as possible” (Andeweg 2000, 512), such as bicameralism, an oversized cabinet, and an electoral system of proportional representation. In contrast, institutional features such as a plurality system of elections, executive dominance over parliament, a unitary state, and a dependent central bank are characteristic of majoritarian democracies in which political majorities rule.

¹ The authors would like to express their gratitude for the permission of Routledge to reprint and publish the introductory essay as an EUI-paper.

These rather formal institutional indicators lend themselves relatively easily to quantitative data analysis that compares consensus democracies with majoritarian democracies at the macro-level. However, they do not fully reflect whether and how decision-makers *do* consensus politics in practice. Moreover, the broad and encompassing nature of generic conceptual typologies based on rather formal institutions makes them vulnerable to empirical observations that do not fit the prescribed typology (Steiner 1981; Van Schendelen 1984). In this regard it is important to note that research focusing on general formal characteristics has concluded that there has been no direct European impact on majoritarian or consensus democracies, if measured according to Lijphart's institutional indicators (Anderson 2002). This should come as no surprise as the formal and fundamental traits of a polity are the stickiest. In contrast, researchers who have developed more fine-grained, detailed measures and have focused on political practices at the micro-level, observe a significant impact of European integration on national politics (Sciarini et al. 2004; Bäck et al. 2009). So, empirical research on changes in consensus politics may thus be sensitive to the indicators used. Another disadvantage of using macro-institutional indicators is that this often results in endless and inconclusive debates on whether or not an entire country can be classified as being consociational, consensual or something else (Steiner 1981; Van Schendelen 1984). An exclusive focus on such indicators is less useful in the context of this project as the Low Countries do not differ tremendously in terms of their formal institutional set-up and have not dramatically changed during the last decades, with the exception of the federalization of Belgium. More important is that some policy areas or political arenas are characterized by political decisions arrived at through competitive, polarizing and adversarial processes, while such a non-consensual mode of politics is less prevalent in other domains (Hendriks and Bovens 2008). For these reasons, we concentrate here on political practices at the micro-level by taking particular institutions, arenas, actors, and policy areas as the key units of analysis, and not the political system as a whole.

Overview 1. What is consensus politics?

<i>inclusive</i>	involving as many political and societal stakeholders as possible in decision-making process
<i>elitist</i>	elites dominate decision-making; indirect citizen representation
<i>co-operative</i>	an overall propensity to seek compromises
<i>non-majoritarian</i>	avoiding simple majority voting in decision-making

The focus is on the way political actors do things structurally, on modes of politics. Consensus politics is therefore conceptualized here as a mode of decision-making (1) at the elite-level that (2) involves as many political actors as possible (3) in a cooperative manner, (4) and avoids decision-making by simple majority (see Overview 1). There are some important ingredients of this conceptualization that are noteworthy. First, note that this conceptualization has much in common with how the EU operates and this fit between small consensual polities such as the Low Countries and the EU conceivably has eased the adaptation of the Low Countries to European integration (cf. Schmidt 2006). Second, our conceptualization of consensus politics does *not* mean that there is widespread agreement on

policies or the complete absence of conflict among the actors involved. It means, instead, that there is the willingness and the effort by political actors to share power and to seek compromises, regardless of the extent of agreement. They can do so in various ways such as by having qualified majority or unanimity voting procedures, granting autonomy to political minorities, and involving non-majoritarian expert bodies such as the judiciary, the bureaucracy, or the central bank in decision-making. De-politicization, which among other mechanisms may be achieved by delegating policy to the EU, may also help to defuse divisive issues by treating them in an apolitical and technocratic way. All these ingredients of consensual politics contrast with the majoritarian mode of politics, which more easily leads to political antagonism because political actors do not attempt to seek the involvement of and power sharing between as many actors as possible, but try to decide by simple majority, instead.

Although the Low Countries have traditionally been considered as key examples of consensus politics, recent accounts of the Low Countries have cast doubt on whether they can still be fully considered cases of consensus politics (Andeweg 2000; 2008; Deschouwer 2002; Keman 2008). Indeed, there have been various political developments in these countries which apparently do not fit well with the traditional concept of consensual politics. Party politics has become much more adversarial in the electoral arena, which is at odds with the continuous need for accommodative political behavior to form coalitions (see for the Netherlands, Pennings and Keman 2008). The recent populist backlash in the Netherlands can also be seen as a challenge to the practice of elite-based consensus-building behind closed doors (Papadopoulos 2005; Hakhverdian and Koop 2007). Nonetheless, important pockets of consensual practices are still at work in the Low Countries (Van Waarden 2002; Hendriks and Bovens 2008). Examples are the management of social welfare state policies in Belgium, labor market regulation and revenue policies in Luxembourg, and decision-making in parliamentary committees in the Netherlands.

Doubts about the usefulness of consensus politics as an accurate description of the politics in the Low Countries today do not, however, invalidate our project. On the contrary, the more refined conceptualization of consensus politics offered here allows us to examine more precisely where and to what extent consensus politics is practiced in a variety of institutions and issue areas. As the various examples discussed above also showed, the relationship between European integration and consensus politics is as of yet unclear. Moreover, recent doubts about the consensual nature of the Low Countries show that a considerable number of political developments are caused endogenously—that is, by factors situated within member-states—and that the relation between European integration and consensus politics is not an exclusive one. Therefore, we do not assume any outcome in advance.

What are European integration and Europeanization?

The volume traces the domestic response to European integration, with respect to the way consensus politics has moulded the impact of European integration as well as how consensus politics may have changed due to European integration. Thus, the *explanans* in this study is European regional integration, which is “the formation of closer economic and/or political linkages” among European countries (Graziano and Vink 2007, 7–8). Although the Low Countries were founding member states and have played an important role in the European integration process, their role in the creation of the EU and its predecessors is not the subject of explanation. The volume thus falls under the heading of Europeanization research. Europeanization generally refers to the process through which European integration affects

domestic policies, politics, and polities (see for instance Risse and Börzel 2003; Graziano and Vink 2007). There are three important difficulties in the study of Europeanization, namely (1) how to understand the *explanandum*, (2) how to distinguish the different components of the Europeanization process, and (3) how to separate the *explanans* from dynamics that are situated at other—global and national—levels. Here we deal only with the first two challenges; we come back to the third one in our methodology section.

One problem in Europeanization research is that the key concept, Europeanization, is characterized by a product-process ambiguity, as with most “tion-words” such as democratization, transformation or socialization (Hacking 1999, 36–8). Europeanization may refer both to “the process of Europeanizing” as well as to the result, “being Europeanized”. This is one of the reasons why some scholars have insisted that Europeanization is a process and not only an outcome to be measured (Featherstone and Radaelli 2003, 30). This dual conceptualization, however, makes it difficult to distinguish properly dependent from independent variables or domestic from European factors. One way to address this challenge is to adopt a comparative research design which includes a micro-level analysis at the level of actors, specific institutions, or policy areas to trace the relevant causal mechanisms (Saurugger 2005). The way the volume analyses consensus politics—by conducting an in-depth analysis of political practices in particular policy venues and areas—fits very well with this middle-range approach to Europeanization.

The *explanandum* is also not easy to grasp because the process of Europeanization may result in varying and substantially different outcomes (Dyson and Goetz 2003). Early Europeanization studies conceived of it basically as a vertical and hierarchical process whereby member-states were expected to download EU laws and policies in a top-down fashion. Many of these early studies focused on how and whether EU rules have been implemented and how EU policies have shaped domestic policies. However, much contemporary EU policymaking involves soft law, benchmarking, and policy coordination. In addition, the larger role of the European Parliament in EU decision-making has increased the importance of the EU as an *arena* for political deal-making and bargaining. In this regard, the EU has become not only an *actor* that hierarchically imposes policies on its member states, but also a political *arena* into which domestic political actors have been increasingly embedded. As an example of Europeanization in this respect, national parliaments have re-organized themselves in order to monitor national EU policymaking more closely. The conception of the EU as an actor *and* an arena stresses much more the impact European integration may have been having on domestic politics and political institutions, rather than on substantive policies. In this regard, investigating the relationship between European integration and consensus politics has an important added value to studies of Europeanization as until now most of this literature on Europeanization has primarily focused on how domestic policy areas have changed due to European integration (Exadaktylos and Radaelli 2009). The growing importance of the EU as a political arena has led recent scholarship to focus much more extensively on how European integration impacts structural modes of politics and polities.

The adaptation of domestic politics to European integration might be driven by two forms, direct and indirect Europeanization (Sciarini et al. 2004). First, *direct Europeanization* is most straightforward and refers to the basic fact that domestic political institutions are increasingly connected to the political system of the European Union. The key question here is how EU-level factors have been leading to changes in the modes of domestic politics. This is what

Goetz calls linkage-adaptation: as domestic political actors (governments, parties...) become more and more implicated in European policymaking, they are expected to adapt their domestic policymaking modes (Goetz 2000). The causal importance of the EU with regard to *direct Europeanization* is relatively easy to isolate; sometimes it is even trivial, for instance, when foreign ministries establish departmental units in order to coordinate EU affairs (Haverland 2006). Yet, the nature of such coordination devices could fit well with or can be organized according to the prevailing consensual and power-sharing tradition, or it could also undermine existing procedures and mechanisms. For instance, in order to facilitate the transposition of EU directives, countries may create procedures that circumvent existing and established venues of consultations.

Second, many studies on the impact of European integration on countries emphasize the process of market creation and the enlarging scale of economic interactions. European integration has had a considerably impact on the political and economic environment of the member states (Fatás 1997; Cheshire 1999; Costa-I-Font and Tremosa-I-Balcells 2003). Other studies point to the potential of European integration to reshape government-society relations and center-periphery interactions within the member states (Kohler-Koch et al. 1998; Bartolini 2005, 252ff). These impacts can be labeled as *indirect* Europeanization, which refers to the adaptation of a country's polity, politics, or policies to an increasingly Europeanizing context (Sciarini et al. 2004). A problem with this form of adaptation is that it is rather difficult to demonstrate direct causation, not in the least because of overlapping processes of growing economic linkages at the European and global levels (Haverland 2006). Yet, such indirect Europeanization may have had tremendous implications for the political autonomy of domestic governments. For instance, it is argued that European integration has a differential impact on territorial entities within member states (for instance through regional funds, immigration, or differentiated investment patterns between the regions) and this may put stress on the legitimacy and efficacy of traditional consensual modes of policymaking (Kurzer 1997). Moreover, the consequences of indirect Europeanization could vary across countries as some countries have been impacted, due to the processes of European integration, much more in terms of the increasing diversity and heterogeneity that are partially a result of Europeanization processes (Alesina and Spolaore 2003). For instance, the rise of sub-state nationalism and regionalism in Belgium relates to the fact that differences in external economic dependence on foreign direct investment have resulted in political economic preferences varying substantially between the different Belgian regions (Beyers and Bursens 2013). Even the case of Luxembourg exemplifies this. Due to the combination of labor mobility and labor market demand in Luxembourg, about 70 percent of its contemporary workforce consists of non-nationals, the bulk of them being cross-border workers (overall these cross-border workers represent about 44 percent of the country's workforce). Therefore, even though the substance of indirect European integration may have been similar in the Low Countries due to their shared geographical location, it may have impacted them differently depending on their differentiated domestic structures.

To trace the adaptation to the multifaceted nature of European integration carefully among the manifold other developments at play at the domestic, European and global level, an in-depth analysis at micro-level would therefore be most appropriate. Such an approach should also enable a proper examination of the causal effects of European integration. When conceptualizing the range of outcomes of Europeanization processes scholars are sometimes tempted to expect *changes* to be occurring *almost everywhere* as a result of European integration. In statistical parlance, Europeanization research may fall prey to the listing of

false positives and negatives. An example of a false negative is, for instance, that Europeanization may—because domestic interests make clever use of EU-level opportunities—be sustaining the domestic status quo and impeding transformation. In this line of thought, Europeanization has not been changing consensus politics, but simply underpins it. False positives occur when research excessively concentrates on instances of Europeanization and, based on this, concludes that countries have become strongly Europeanized. For instance, the number of bureaucrats who operate at both the EU and the national level has been growing considerably during the past decades, but the vast majority of domestic bureaucrats may nevertheless remain weakly affected by EU affairs. A closer look at consensus politics in a variety of policy areas and political arenas is a suitable way towards a better understanding of how European integration relates to consensus politics.

The relationship between European integration and consensus politics

In-depth studies of a variety of policy-areas and political arenas also allows for a more refined analysis of the factors that influence the absence and presence of consensus politics, which is a problem the scholarly literature on consensus politics still faces (Bogaards 1998; Andeweg 2000). Lijphart (1969), for instance, identified the external environment of states as one of the factors driving the development of consensus politics. The more the external environment is perceived as threatening to the entire polity, the more consensual modes of politics are likely. Since European integration has provided monetary stability and a secure environment to the Low Countries, the incentive to make domestic compromises and to share power may have weakened, as the example at the beginning of this chapter illustrated. Another factor that potentially fosters consensus politics is the lack of exit options, since political actors have to solve political conflict collectively when locked into a national polity. A political environment with an increasing number of exit options may therefore undermine the possibility of consensual domestic politics. For example, European integration may have increased the potential for sub-national entities such as Flanders to seek to become more autonomous and independent players in a wider European context, putting cooperative center-periphery relations under pressure (Bartolini 2005, 380ff). Oddly enough, most theoretical and empirical accounts of consensus democracies consider domestic politics in an almost isolated fashion, disconnected from external political developments such as Europeanization or globalization. An in-depth exploration of the relationship between European integration and consensus politics may therefore be a significant step in understanding these prerequisites of consensus politics.

As argued earlier, a closer investigation of the relationship between European integration and consensus politics has added value for studies of Europeanization since the existing literature has only recently started to focus more on structural modes of politics in addition to policy areas (Exadaktylos and Radaelli 2009). Next, the precise connection between consensus politics and European integration has barely been researched. Most of the consensus politics literature concerns whether or not and the extent to which the EU itself can be conceived of as a variation of a consensus polity (see among others Bogaards 2002; Bogaards and Crepaz 2002; Kaiser 2002; Schmidt 2002; Papadopoulos and Magnette 2010). Moreover, literature on the Europeanization of politics often focuses on large countries such as France, Germany or the United Kingdom. In our view, this leads to a biased picture as Europe has only a small number of polities that can be considered as majoritarian (mainly the UK and France), while many small or mid-sized polities are characterized by practices of power sharing and making compromises. The fragmented literature on the Europeanization of the Low Countries mostly concentrates on how national bureaucracies have adapted to European decision-making and

the implementation of European legislation, and is by and large descriptive. A potentially fundamental shift or transformation that has occurred in one of the most characteristic political features of the Low Countries, especially if it would be rooted in Europeanization, thus deserves more attention.

We must admit, however, that investigating a relation between the experience with Europe and the functioning of small consensual democracies, including the Low Countries, is not entirely new. In the literature on socio-economic policy concertation it has been shown how corporatist arrangements between governments, labor unions, and business, have resulted into a generous welfare system which compensates potential losers of European (and international) free trade, a scheme considered to be essential for the survival and growth of small and trade-oriented economies (Jones 2008, chapter 2). The historian Alan Milward has argued that European integration fostered substantial economic growth after WWII, which facilitated the establishment and maintenance of the welfare state, a development that helped to consolidate the European nation-state (Milward 1995). A similar idea is found in Peter Katzenstein's classic work, which argues that small open economies seek to create stable international institutions, such as the EU, so that domestic elites can pursue consensual growth-oriented economic policies (Katzenstein 1985; 2003). If this argument holds, the external and stabilizing pressures emanating from the EU should, instead of hollowing out, have reinforced existing modes of power sharing and consensual politics (Sciarini et al. 2004).

The combination of neo-corporatism and consensus politics, on the one hand, and European integration, on the other hand, as it materialized in the first decades after WWII may, however, have evolved since then. The joint efforts by governments, labor unions, and employer federations to keep the Low Countries internationally competitive were and still are partly dependent on the willingness and ability of business to keep investments and capital domestically rooted. The existing corporatist institutions may now actually be impairing flexible responses to quickly unfolding global developments. Capital and, to some extent, labor, especially high-skilled professionals, can now more easily threaten to exit national negotiations to their own advantage, putting the potential losers (e.g., sectors that face import competition, and the subsidized and public sectors) in a rather weak position (Keohane and Milner 1996). In addition, the welfare burden may have led to higher wage costs and therefore uncompetitive industries, requiring the welfare state to be sanitized. Although these developments could have rendered domestic corporatist concertation and agreement under stress, empirical research has so far demonstrated the opposite, showing instead either some signs of Europeanization having had a stabilizing effect on corporatist policymaking practices (Falkner and Leiber 2004) or no effect at all (Afonso and Papadopoulos 2010). Other, related developments can however be of interest. In effect, national solidarity within the welfare state does not always fit well with the arrival of foreign labor migrants, which may lead to antagonistic politics on the issues of national identity (Jones 2008, 224). Because of this, "losers" of increased political, economic, and cultural competition due to European integration (and globalization) may eventually demand closing the national borders again (Kriesi et al. 2008). This may lead to a new cleavage with the "winners" who perceive open borders as economically profitable or culturally enriching. The question is still open as to what extent this cleavage between parties and voters can be and is going to be pacified by consensual arrangements, particularly because European integration has limited the leeway of governments to compensate economic and cultural losers.

The more limited literature on European integration and consensus politics beyond the socio-economic domain provides a fairly mixed picture. On the one hand, the compound policymaking systems of the Low Countries seem to fit quite well with the even more fragmented policymaking process at the European level. European integration is therefore not expected to have exerted much adaptational pressure on the former's political practices (Schmidt 2006). On the other hand, the fact that the EU-level provides many exit options for domestic actors may be gradually undermining or transforming the structural conditions that foster consensus politics (Bartolini 2005, 280ff). As the contemporary literature is characterized by a panoply of competing and contradictory expectations, we lack a concise and testable theoretical framework. This makes that our endeavor is, instead of deductive, more of an exploratory nature. However, this does not mean that it is devoid of some conceptual guidelines, steering, or direction. The following sections present various propositions, structured by the research questions, that steer the empirical analysis of a variety of political arenas, actors, and policy-areas in the subsequent chapters. To express that we are in the initial stage of theorizing, the expected relationships between European integration and consensus politics are described more modestly as propositions instead of hypotheses. Most of these propositions have been derived from the existing empirical and theoretical literature.

How consensus politics may have shaped the impact of European integration

Two research questions guide our investigation. The first one is whether and how consensus politics has shaped the impact of European integration in the Low Countries. In this way, the overall context of domestic consensual mode of politics may have functioned as a filter, an intermediate factor that influenced the impact of European integration. At first blush, it would be useful to compare cases of consensual politics with majoritarian ones. However, for several reasons, we decided to focus on the Low Countries. First, whether consensus politics (still) marks all policy areas and political arenas in the Low Countries has yet to be empirically proven. Second, theorizing on the relationship between European integration and modes of politics, and consensus politics more in particular, is still in its infancy. A detailed analysis of the relationship within the Low Countries would therefore be a more fruitful start to generate hypotheses on this particular relationship.

To find out whether and how consensus politics has filtered European integration's impact we can focus on different aspects. A typical feature of consensual politics is the segmentation of policymaking in a culture of extensive consultations and power-sharing that involves many stakeholders. In sum, a central venue that oversees the coherence of EU policymaking is lacking, and if it exists, it has weak hierarchical power and is highly dependent on consensus that needs to be reached among a large set of stakeholders. This means that policymaking processes take much time and that domestic timing does not necessarily synchronize well with the timing of the EU-level policymaking process.

A consensual mode of politics constellation may have had three important consequences for how European integration has been managed. First, it may have affected the ability to upload domestic policy preferences at the EU-level, which would mean that especially policy areas that are strongly characterized by consensual modes of policymaking project their preferences less effectively at the EU-level (Börzel 1999; Schmidt 2006, 234). It should be noted, however, the absence of strong and fixed positions enables domestic policymakers to adapt quickly to the exigencies of the recurrent and multi-issue bargaining processes that take place at the EU-level. Second, consensual political institutions are less effective regarding the transposition and the effective enforcement of EU legislation. Many stakeholders need to be

consulted and the presence of many domestic veto-players makes the downloading of EU legislation less effective. Nonetheless, in order to cope with these downsides, member states may have established procedures and mechanisms which bypass these consensual modes of policymaking in order to make implementation more effective. Finally, despite the fact that a pro-European consensus has for a long time dominated how the Low Countries organize their EU business, the absence of one single policy center that oversees the coherence of EU policymaking makes that an overarching legitimizing EU narrative is less likely to have been constructed (Schmidt, 2006). Indeed, it is only very recently that Europe started to gain a more prominent place in public political debates, in particular with the Dutch and Luxembourgish referenda on the EU Constitution, and the Euro-crisis, but political parties seldom referred to the EU before.

In sum, varying degrees of consensual nature between policy areas and political venues should also be accompanied with a different way of processing the impact of European integration. Variation in the consensual nature of the three Low Countries should also be reflected in the way they have shaped Europe's impact. The Belgian federation is, because of its federal structure, much more segmented and more in need of extensive consultations. Therefore, it is expected to have been less effective in uploading and downloading than the unitary Netherlands and Luxembourg. Despite these differences, the Low Countries have been involved in European integration from its very beginning and have shared their experience with EU integration through cooperation (for instance by issuing common memoranda) and diffusion (for instance in adopting the same kinds of legal measures or wording for the transposition of certain EU directives).

How European integration may have changed consensus politics

The second research question is whether consensus politics has been changed due to European integration. Whereas in the previous section consensus politics was considered as an intermediate factor, it is here the dependent variable. One can formulate propositions as to why European integration would have changed domestic consensus politics, as well as to why European integration would not have changed domestic consensus politics. This very fact underlines the need to clarify how both concepts are related and to tease out carefully how this relation varies according to policy areas or political venues. Many of these propositions have been derived from the previously mentioned book by Vivien Schmidt (2006), Peter Katzenstein's (1985; 2003) early work on small states, and a list of factors favorable to consensus politics based on Lijphart (see for an overview, Andeweg 2000, 521ff.).

Even though the Low Countries have experienced phases of intense political conflict, they have long-lasting traditions of elite accommodation. Such a tradition of making compromises and power sharing could reflect a political culture in which consultation has been considered more appropriate than antagonistic political behavior. Long-standing consensual practices are considered as prerequisites of consensus politics (Andeweg 2000). According to a sociological-institutionalist understanding of a consensual tradition, institutional stickiness imply that deeply-rooted domestic practices are resistant to change. European integration is therefore expected to have only limited impact on the tradition of consensus politics. The long-lasting tradition of the consensual mode of politics in the Low Countries may also have a different origin. Typical for these countries has been the absence of the prospect for obtaining an enduring majority for any of the political actors. Since the prospects of obtaining a solid majority are virtually nil, the only way to realize policy objectives is through collaboration with other actors (Andeweg 200, 524; Andeweg and Irwin 2009, 51; Deschouwer 2009). As

European integration has not changed the prospects of these political actors of remaining in minority positions, consensus politics should still be the game in town.

It has also been argued that the small size of a country or its population is also a factor that fosters consensus politics (see Andeweg 2000, 522). That may tie in with the greater awareness of being vulnerable in small states (Katzenstein 1985). Small states with open economies such as those which make up the Low Countries are more inclined to respond flexibly to the external environment due to the smaller size of their governments. By adopting a less confrontational strategy at the international level, they aim to gain as much influence as possible (Katzenstein 2003, 24–5). In Lijphart's account of consensus politics, the prudence of elites also plays an eminent role. If they foresee conflicts that may destabilize the country, they may take preventive measures by seeking cooperation (Andeweg 2000, 521). Increasing European integration would therefore be expected to have exerted (almost) no pressure on the Low Countries. On the contrary, the European integration project fits perfectly well with the overall foreign policy goals and the domestic political culture of small consensual democracies.

Moreover, this tradition of consensus politics fits quite well with how the EU functions as a political system in which power is also diffused and shared in a highly accessible, depoliticized, predominantly interest-based decision-making process (Schmidt 2006). In particular, for compound polities such as those of the Low Countries, the EU is experienced as a complementary level of decision-making of the same nature. Since many EU policies are cross-sectoral or affect different domains simultaneously, various ministers (and their departments) are increasingly pressured to collaborate. The EU could also be used as yet another depoliticizing strategy in domestic politics, similarly to the way the judiciary or research committees have been used to defuse polarization and conflict on contentious issues by treating them in an apolitical, technocratic way. The technocratic nature of many EU policies may also have stimulated the appointment of sectoral ministers on the basis of their technical expertise, rather than their political experience, which fosters depoliticizing inclinations (Bäck et al. 2009). Much of the work on the political-administrative interpenetration of the EU-level and the national level argues that adaptation to the EU engenders cooperative strategies (Börzel 1999; Beyers and Bursens 2006a; 2006b). Furthermore, the establishment of extensive and inclusive coordination mechanisms to create domestic consensus on (the implementation of) European policies also matches existing consensual practices in policymaking. Additionally, the transfer of competences to the EU level has lowered the burden of decision-making at the national level on fundamental issues such as peace and security, access to foreign markets, and monetary stability. Although less domestic decision-making leaves less room for package deals, a low decision-making load could also reduce the overall potential for conflict and therefore help reach compromises more easily on remaining issues (see Andeweg 2000, 522). Overall then, European integration could have facilitated consensus politics at the national level.

However, this good fit may also have led to the unraveling and unbundling of national consensus systems. Increasing recourse to pluralism and sectoralization in policymaking at the EU level may have undermined national consensual arrangements, such as neo-corporatism. Instead of a small number of peak associations, more interest groups could have sought influence due to the multiplication of access opportunities provided by the more pluralist setting at the EU-level. Sectoralization weakens cross-sectoral and encompassing business organizations, since the interests and channels of influence for the organizational

membership diversify. European integration offers directly and indirectly exit options to parts of the business community and sub-national authorities. They can therefore increasingly escape from national attempts to share power and make compromises. In this way, the ideology of social partnership is undermined, unless national loyalties restrain the inclination to leave. A similar causal mechanism may also hold for ministers and ministries. Because the EU enables some ministries to influence policies at the EU-level more than others (e.g., agriculture), it makes them less dependent on cooperation with other domestic ministries.

The way the EU is organized, may, despite its apparent good fit, therefore have led to less consensual politics. Due to the central role of the European Council, the prime minister has gained in status, something which can be seen as having led to the presidentialization of parliamentary systems. In addition, the intergovernmental structure of EU decision-making also stimulates centralized coordination networks and leads to more hierarchy within the central government (e.g., so-called 'prime ministerialization'), a situation which runs counter the traditional notion of consensus politics. Moreover, the fact that member states are expected to speak with one voice at the EU level exerts substantial pressure to centralize the coordination of domestic contribution on EU policy issues (Harmsen 1999; Beyers and Bursens 2006b). Overall, European decision-making enhances the position of national governments vis-à-vis national parliaments, because of their primary access to information and decision-making at the EU level. Particularly opposition parties will therefore be less involved in decision-making, since they also lack an informal source of information. In the uploading process, the rhythm of EU decision-making may also limit the possibility of extensive consultations with interest groups and parliament (Harmsen 1999). Furthermore, in order to avoid delays in the transposition and enforcement of EU rules, existing advisory and consultation procedures may be bypassed in the downloading process in order to smoothen fast implementation.

Also the very nature of EU policies may have put pressure on national consensual politics. One of the great advantages of European integration for small countries, namely monetary stability and military security, is that it lowers external threats. Yet, this may in turn have weakened the idea of being vulnerable, and the subsequent urge to respond collectively to external challenges (Katzenstein 1985). European integration may thus have weakened the incentive to practice consensus politics. As in other countries, European integration may be an external threat of an economic or cultural nature (Kriesi et al. 2008). Free movement of goods, capital, services, and persons has led to increasing competition and rising migration from other EU member states in the Low Countries. They would therefore prefer closure of national borders, whereas cosmopolitans perceive open borders as an economic opportunity and cultural enrichment. European integration could thus have generated a cleavage between nationalists and cosmopolitans.

However, European integration also limits the possibilities to compensate the (self-perceived) losers of open borders, due to the following factors. First, an effective opposition of "losers" *within* the EU is more difficult due to its expert-dominated and interest-oriented nature (Scharpf 1999; Mair 2007). As a consequence, losers' deference to the EU political establishment (including national governments) could have weakened, opposition *against* the EU could have grown, and a national compromise would have become less likely between pro- and anti-EU groupings. Second, the transfer of national competences to EU institutions has limited the national opportunities to make compensatory deals. The budget rules of the EMU and restrictions on state subsidies complicate side-payments to alleviate domestic

opposition and reach deals. The EU policies with respect to the free movement of persons also enhances the feeling of a loss of identity due to migration. Third, the legalistic nature of EU legislation limits the opportunities to compensate losers by a flexible application, which would otherwise allow losers a certain measure of autonomy in which they can deviate from EU rules. Fourth, winners of European integration may be less inclined to compensate losers, because they can more easily escape national decision-making in a borderless Europe if they are not restrained by overarching national loyalties.

The methodological set-up of the volume

A major problem of Europeanization research is to determine whether changes (or the absence of change) in domestic politics can be explained by European integration and to what extent these are distinct from dynamics situated at other—global and national—levels. We are aware of the fact that modes of politics within countries are shaped by multiple factors. European integration is just one potential factor in a complex web of variables that may cause changes. During the past three decades the politics of the Low Countries has gone through profound changes. There has been rising populism and political extremism, often as the result of tensions related to immigration, which have led to increasing levels of electoral volatility and fragmentation of the party political landscape; a growing power of bureaucratic agencies; and a decline of traditional modes of corporatist policymaking, to name a few. The magnitude of some of these developments is disputed and not all are directly, or even primarily, related or caused by the experience of these countries with European integration. Yet, the influence of European integration on consensus politics might also be collinear with or mediate the impact of processes such as globalization, economic liberalization, new public management, and individualization. For instance, and Luxembourg is a case in point, uploading and downloading EU legislation may depend on bureaucratic capacity. A less deferential public may also impact consensus politics among political elites, and perhaps even more so than European integration. Moreover, how the Low Countries deal with political challenges that are not even caused by European integration—for instance, population ageing—may be significantly shaped by pressures, opportunities, and constraints at the European level.

So, how do we single out the impact of European integration, and avoid false negatives and positives? Several strategies have been adopted. First, each chapter in the volume offers a short history of consensus politics concerning the specific actor, institution, or policy-area before European integration “hit home” hard. The year 1990 has been used roughly as the turning point in the process of European integration, following the creation of a single market based on the Single European Act (1987) and the launch of a political and monetary union by the Treaty of Maastricht (1993). The whole period since 1990 has not only been characterized by the extension and deepening of the *acquis* into new policy areas (such as the environment, consumer affairs, and public health), but also by the emergence of various new forms of cooperation and coordination (e.g., the Open Method of Coordination), further reform of the EU’s institutional framework, as well as the continuing enlargement of the European Union. This historical part of each chapter not only offers a better understanding of ongoing developments of consensus politics, but it also enables us to make a tentative comparison between developments before and after European integration.

Second, each chapter theorizes how the relationship between European integration and consensus politics would have evolved after 1990. For this purpose, authors rely on the conceptualization of consensual politics as we developed in this paper. In addition, each chapter addresses how consensus politics shaped the impact of European integration and/or

how European integration may have changed consensus politics. This allows to see to what extent the theorized relationships are congruent with the empirical findings in the specific studies of institutions, actors, and policy areas that each chapter presents (Haverland 2007). Comparisons between more and less EU-affected aspects of the actors, institutions, or policy areas studied offers a third strategy to show whether and how European integration is related to consensus politics. Fourth, if needed, authors analyzed with the help of an inductive bottom-up analysis of the evolution of actors, institutions, and policy areas in hand, other factors than European integration. Close empirical examination of the post-1990 period also allows for studying the way consensus politics has shaped European integration, since the EU has been expanded considerably in that period in terms of legislation. It is important to emphasize that in order to avoid false negatives or positives, we intentionally did not pressure authors to seek confirmation for a specific outcome, but rather adopt an open-minded attitude allowing for divergent or contradictory research outcomes. This is because we did not hypothesize in advance that the relationship between European integration and consensus politics should need to manifest itself similarly across the cases. Nonetheless, for some areas or arenas the findings or the state of the literature allows authors to develop more precise expectations and to evaluate these in a more explanatory mode.

The chapters examine a wide range of actors and institutions as well as some key policy areas. The first part of the volume deals with the major political actors and institutions: the central governments, the various parliaments, political parties, the courts, the national bureaucracies, and interest groups. In contrast to most other volumes on Europeanization, the volume also includes a chapter on the position of the courts. The role of domestic courts and their relationship with the European court system and legal order has largely been ignored until recently in the political science literature. This is a shortcoming since domestic political actors may also use the EU-level court system and/or EU-related legal rules in order to pursue a depoliticized, non-majoritarian strategy to alleviate or solve domestic political conflicts. The second part of the volume focuses on a selection of crucial policy areas in order to flesh out how consensus politics is practiced. Rather than discussing the regulatory impact of the EU on substantive policies, it is the purpose of these chapters to focus on how consensus practices in particular fields relate to European integration. Relatively new issues such as the ratification of EU treaties and migration are examined in addition to traditional corporatist policymaking on socio-economic issues.

The conceptualization of consensus politics, European integration and Europeanization, the two research questions as well as the suggested relationships between European integration and consensus politics offered the guidelines for the authors to examine practices of consensus politics in a certain political arena or policy area. Where logical and relevant, authors highlight specific aspects of consensus politics. For example, the chapter on the ratification of EU treaties focuses on the elitist nature of consensus politics, while the chapter on the courts examines judicial review, which is according to Lijphart (2008) a crucial element of consensus democracies.

Our aim is to present a comprehensive overview of the Europeanization of the Low Countries from the angle of consensus politics that is accessible for academics as well as for students and political practitioners. Rather than creating completely new data sources for this project, most chapters offer secondary analysis of existing data, from all three countries if available. Each chapter takes a certain actor or institution (government, parliament, parties) or policy area as the unit of analysis. This selection of cases does not only provide an overview of

Europeanization in the Low Countries in the last twenty years, but also a sufficient basis for exploring propositions on the relationship between European integration and consensus politics more generally.

Main findings

The chapters provide a more variegated image of consensus politics in the Low Countries than the common denominator of consensus democracies suggests. In combination with a refined understanding of consensus politics, the analyses of a variety of actors, institutions, and policy areas offers an in-depth view how a particular mode of politics does not only vary between, but also within member states across time and place. Also relevant is that each contribution provides a wide range of possibilities to operationalize consensus politics, such as the distribution of parliamentary committee chairs among the parties or the extent as to which external advisers are consulted. Each empirical study offer a wealth of information on the question of whether European integration has affected consensus politics in the Low Countries.

In chapter 2 Patrick Dumont, Arco Timmermans, and Catherine Moury ask whether coalition government formation and maintenance have been altered by the ongoing Europeanization of the Low Countries. One of their main findings is that coalition formation has generally become less inclusive but has continued to be dominated by the traditional pillar parties in the last two decades. Other parties, including Eurosceptic ones, have seen their electoral share grow but remain excluded from an increasingly valued governmental representation. An exception is Belgium, where the large number of state reforms and not European integration, has resulted in more encompassing coalitions. European integration does not appear to have a clear independent effect on the length of coalition formation processes and the content of coalition agreements. Nevertheless, the authors document more evidence regarding the contribution of European integration to the long-term development of these latter aspects of coalition formation and governance in the Low Countries than on a potential empowerment of prime ministers in cabinet.

Chapter 3 by Astrid Spreitzer and Arco Timmermans shows that over the last two decades opposition parties have also obtained more instruments to scrutinize national EU policymaking. They also demonstrate that votes on EU-related bills do not reflect a trend towards less broad parliamentary support for the EU. Yet, despite the growing opportunities for opposition parties, the European Affairs Committees are chaired disproportionately by governing parties. The reason for the underrepresentation is yet to be explored, but it fits with the trend of a declining inclusion of opposition parties—who are often more critical about the EU—on EU decision-making both in government and in parliament.

Benoît Rihoux, Astrid Spreitzer, and Ruud Koole offer a closer investigation of party elites in chapter 4 and demonstrate that the potential power of EU-focused party elites has increased, especially when they are in government. They relate this trend to the growing polarization on EU issues and the ensuing organizational and financial resources these party elites have at their disposal. Nevertheless, we cannot conclude that within-party decision-making has become more inclusive by taking these EU-focused party elites on board. Instead, in all three countries and in most parties, party leadership has further centralized in the last twenty years.

Chapter 5 on constitutional review by Patricia Popelier and Wim Voermans indicates that the EU law has as of yet only had a limited impact compared to the European Convention on

Human Rights (ECHR). The EU's accession to the ECHR may deeply alter this situation in the future. It would allow the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) to focus more explicitly on fundamental rights, potentially undermining consensus deals among political actors. Nevertheless, the increasing judicial review by the courts due to European integration may eventually also depoliticize the outcomes of litigation. Furthermore, Patricia Popelier and Wim Voermans express doubt as to what extent judicial review is a proper characteristic of consensus democracies, as judicial review may also thwart laboriously crafted consensus deals.

After these four chapters that focus on the classic *trias politica*—government (chapter 2), parliament and parties (chapter 3 and 4), and courts (chapter 5)—the volume presents a set of chapters that consider how the governments of the Low Countries interact with societal stakeholders and the extent to which state-society relations and interest representation has Europeanized.

Chapter 6 on the administrative practice of external advice seeking by Caspar van den Berg, Caelesta Braun, and Trui Steen confirms the overall image of a limited impact of European integration on consensus politics. Domestic developments are of much greater importance to understand fluctuations in the intensity of external advice seeking by national civil servants. The goodness of fit between European and domestic modes of decision-making may serve as an explanation in this respect. Even though consensus politics has remained common practice in the three Low Countries, they also demonstrate that the type of actors involved—more particularly, the political or administrative nature of the consulted stakeholders—differs considerably from country to country.

Chapter 7 on interest groups by Jan Beyers, Caelesta Braun, and Markus Haverland also concludes that European integration has had a rather limited impact on the overall mode of interest group politics in the Low Countries. Even though particularly business interest groups have developed more EU-level activities, most interest groups continue to prioritize the national level. Similarly, Barbara Vis and Jaap Woldendorp conclude in chapter 8 on corporatism in the Low Countries that the *modus operandi* of corporatism has not changed fundamentally because of European integration. Though European integration has had an indirect effect on the substance of the corporatist negotiations, the social partners have not sought to seek strategically upload their preferences to the EU level to circumvent domestic consensus politics.

Peter Bursens, Kathleen Hielscher, and Mendeltje van Keulen in chapter 9 offer a closer analysis of how the Low Countries organize day-to-day EU coordination, in particular whether this coordination features consensual practices. Their systematic mapping of procedures and practices shows that inclusiveness and avoidance of decision-making by simple majority still feature prominently in the in the Low Countries. That also holds for the Dutch case, where the parliament has become more closely involved in the last decades. One of their explanations is the need to develop a single position for the Council of Ministers.

The volume also includes a contribution that relates to migration policy as this touches on the cleavage between cosmopolitans and nationalists in the Low Countries. Maarten Vink, Saskia Bonjour, and Ilke Adam focus their analysis in chapter 10 on family migration policy and conclude that rising political contestation on fundamental policy issues has emphasized the need for more—and not less—consensus politics to cope with these conflicts. Thus, though

European integration has changed the substance of consensus politics, it has not changed the domestic political practice itself, confirming the findings of Barbara Vis and Jaap Woldendorp. Yet, although Vink, Bonjour, and Adam show that practices of consensus politics may hamper a member state's capacity to upload its preferences towards the EU level, they could not find convincing support for their proposition that consensus politics might have weakened the transposition of EU legislation on migration.

Finally, Joop van Holsteyn and Hans Vollaard show in chapter 11 that the ratification of the European Constitutional Treaty in the Low Countries has had some impact on the elitist nature of consensus politics. After receiving fundamental criticism on their elitist mode of politics, national politicians felt that popular involvement should and could be organized by launching a referendum to legitimize a new and important step in the European integration process. Belgian politicians eventually shirked away from having a referendum, fearing its divisive impact on their country. However, the ratification of EU treaties also kept its elitist nature in the Netherlands and Luxembourg, the referendums were initiated by the elites and were only consultative. After the resounding no against the European Constitutional Treaty in the Netherlands, the elites declined to consult the people again when other EU treaties had to be ratified, and restored the elitist nature of EU decision-making.

Exploring the relationship between European integration and consensus politics in the Low Countries has thus been a worthwhile endeavor. The volume provides a comprehensive overview of Europeanization in three founding member states of the EU as well as a better understanding of the varieties of consensus politics across and within countries. One of the major conclusions we can draw from all the chapters is that though European integration has certainly impacted on various aspects of consensus politics, it has not led to a major shift. On the contrary, in most political arenas and policy areas the impact has been rather incremental and piecemeal, which leads us to conclude that consensual politics is a resilient feature of politics in the Low Countries. An important explanation for this resilience is that European integration has not affected basic structural underpinnings of consensus politics. All political elites—be they parties, interest groups, or ministries—are, in one way or another, in a minority position. Without the prospect of obtaining a dominant position, they still have to resort to consensus politics in order to have some policy influence.

Finally, in the epilogue, Rudy Andeweg reflects further upon our main findings. He discusses consensus politics in terms of joint power but also divided power. Federal Belgium resembles the EU more closely with respect to divided power than Luxembourg and the Netherlands do. Andeweg argues that the EU impact should vary differently accordingly. He also expresses great concerns about the continuing de-politicisation in the Low Countries and the EU due to persistent practice of consensus politics. In his view, the a-political and technocratic nature of the multi-level EU polity challenges its democratic legitimacy, and could and does unleash populist and anti-system resistance. In short, according to Andeweg, the resilience of consensus politics, not only despite but also because of European integration, for the Low Countries is not necessarily a blessing.

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