

# European political elites in comparison: the long road to convergence (EURELITE)

an ESF Scientific Network

This Network is making a major contribution to an ongoing comparative study of the political elites and individuals within European nation states. Through a diachronic (historical) study of similarities and differences between recruitment and career patterns, it will be discovered to what extent the process of European integration can rely on a convergence between the different national groups involved.

The basis of the study will be a unified dataset called DATACUBE which has been partially completed with the help of an earlier ESF grant. An initial objective of this Network therefore is to complete the DATACUBE to provide the empirical data for the main research themes. The study of the themes will involve bringing together within a common research programme political scientists, sociologists and historians who have already studied the long term patterns of transformation within Europe's political elites from an empirical perspective.

The focus of this Network is the changing nature of parliamentary representation and the extent to which similarities and differences between nation states govern the development of European parliaments. With the prospect of EEC enlargement in the near future, the study is paying particular attention to the process of democratisation in central and eastern European countries that until about 1990 were governed by authoritarian regimes.

A structural approach, based on a consideration of the patterns connecting legislators to sections of society, but leaving out immediate records of their attitudes, behaviour and orientations has been adopted for this project. However such aspects are studied indirectly in so far as positions in society are reflecting past and directing future political behaviour. These positions are included in the data sets.

The study is unique in seeking to make comparisons over a wide temporal and geographical scale, embracing most European countries and a period of over 150 years ranging from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. But before such comparisons are possible, the DATACUBE database currently under construction must be completed. Further integration and additions are needed for the data pertaining to countries already included in the database, i.e. Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, and the UK, and partially for Denmark, Hungary, Portugal and Spain. Data on the countries of eastern Europe need to be added, along with a dataset on members of the European Parliament. The data are structured in three dimensions, with time, and countries along two axes, and the variables under study along the third axis. The data are broken down into both parties and whole legislatures, so that comparisons can be made between parties and nations, or between a given party across two or

more nations. The variable data are of three kinds: data that indicate legislators' positions in society, such as occupation, education, gender and age; data specifically related to the range of positions within the political systems, such as government or ministerial positions held, and involvement in party activities; and data relating to individuals' careers within the parliament, age at first election and the number of elections subsequently contested successfully.

An extended DATACUBE will provide a sound basis for the Network's main research themes as follows:

- The extent of similarities in the composition of European political elites and the persistence of distinctiveness after almost 50 years of European integration.
- The formation of representative elites after extended periods of authoritarian and totalitarian rule.
- The main changes of political elites in Europe at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> century, when partisan attachments are weakening, the impact of the media is increasing and trans-national influences are growing.
- The inner political elite of government ministers: their characteristics, how they have changed and how they compare to the larger set of parliamentary elites.
- Changes in the recruitment and career patterns of members of the European Parliament and how they compare to MPs at the national level.

These themes will be pursued against a wider conceptual framework for the long-term study of legislative recruitment, involving a supply and demand model of the processes involved. The key concept of this model is the inherent contradiction between the processes of democratisation and professionalisation. Democratisation involves opening channels for wider participation, while political professionalism involves setting high standards that tend to create barriers to outsiders. This conflict between the objectives of democratisation and professionalisation is inherent to political modernisation whereby barriers to entry into the political system based on class and status are diminishing, while the impact of political background and experience is increasing.

The longer term aim is to improve the understanding of the complex relationship between changes in society, changes in the formal structures of opportunity for parliamentary recruitment and career development, patterns of parliamentary development, and policy outcomes. Such understanding should help to develop a dynamic model blending the supply and demand side of the recruitment process.

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