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Introduction: Political Careers in Multi-level Systems

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ABSTRACT Political careers in modern democracies have been affected by important territorial reorganisations of the political system. In the newly emerging multi-level systems long-established career patterns are dissolving and new patterns are emerging. For a number of reasons these changes have not yet been adequately mapped and explained. In this introduction we are arguing for a dynamic, careers oriented approach to supersede the traditional institution-centred analysis. The aim of this special issue – and of further research in this field – is to reveal the existing links between political careers and the complex institutional opportunity structures provided by each political system. While changing institutions affect career pathways, changing career patterns, in turn, are bound to have important repercussions for the institutional and territorial order of political systems in general.

KEY WORDS: Political careers, political professionalization, multi-level systems, regionalization, federalism

Recently, political careers in modern democracies have been affected by three noteworthy processes of institutional change: the professionalization of the state level in federal systems (most notably in Germany and in the USA since the 1970s); the regionalization of formerly unitary states (like the UK, Spain, France and Italy); and the development of supranational institutions (such as the European Parliament).

State institutions in federal systems have undergone a gradual process of *professionalization* which has rendered political positions at this level more attractive. Salaries and allowances of state legislators have increased and so have staff and infrastructural support (cf. Gress and Huth, 1998; Rosenthal, 1998). In many federal countries a state (or regional) mandate has thus become a full-time, long-term, fully paid political job similar to that of national deputies at the federal level. More recently, even local politics, long the undisputed stronghold of political amateurs, has been changing in that direction. Urban politics has experienced a process of creeping (semi-)professionalization that has seen local councillors try to cope with increasing time demands by devising strategies to make a living off politics while officially retaining their amateur status

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(cf. Reiser, 2006). Thus, today, professional political careers are no longer restricted to the federal (or national) level.

Regionalization and the simultaneous development of *supranational institutions* in Europe are two processes that have been blurring the historical cleavage between federal and unitary systems. While the latter added one additional layer to multi-level systems in all the member states of the European Union, the former changed the rules of the political game even more dramatically in some countries. The territorial organization of advanced industrial democracies has thus changed from a bipolar pattern (federal vs. unitary) to one that more resembles a continuum, a change signifying the convergence of federal and formerly unitary systems (Keating, 1998: 112–117; Braun, 2002). For professional politicians, these developments opened up a whole new universe of career opportunities. The rise of these opportunities was greatly helped by the fact that these new regional and supranational institutions were largely professionalized from the outset.

Overall then, career chances for ambitious politicians—or politicians to be—have become both more numerous and more diverse. Contrary to conventional wisdom, career ambitions of professional politicians are no longer necessarily directed towards the national arena, nor are they necessarily geared towards expanding one's territorial jurisdiction (for such a schematic view, see Francis and Kenny, 2000: 2–6). Long-established career patterns are dissolving, new patterns are emerging. Various ways of moving between territorial levels (local, regional, national, supranational) and types of political institutions (executives, legislatures, parties, interest groups) have become possible (for a first empirical analysis of this phenomenon, see Stolz, 2003).

If we are to understand political careers not only as concerning the fate of individual politicians, but also as an important means by which political institutions and different territorial levels are linked, changing career patterns are also bound to have effects on the institutional and the territorial order of political systems in general. Long-term career patterns usually develop in close interrelation with a given institutional framework. Once established, they tend to stabilize the institutional order which has shaped them. Any change in these patterns, though, may seriously hamper the institutional mechanics of the system. Thus, institutional changes affecting career pathways and career ambitions may have repercussions well beyond their original intention.

As of now, however, we know very little about which pathways are actually being pursued. The importance of political careers for the functioning and the development of multi-level systems of government and governance contrasts starkly with the scarce notice given to the topic in academic literature. The impact of political careers for inter-institutional linkage and members' behaviour has hardly been studied—neither from a political careers nor from an institutionalist perspective. Generally, institutions are studied as bounded entities and their memberships as distinct. In the academic division of labour, party research is a field apart from legislative research, and national politics is the domain of other people than regional politics or local politics. Even if the focus is on the relation between institutions or between different levels of government as in research on federalism, the link that exists by way of the experiences or progressive ambition of part of the political personnel is generally excluded from the analysis.

This is a very obvious feature in studies of federalism. From the classics in the field to more recent writings (cf. *inter alia* Friedrich, 1968; Elazar, 1987; Burgess and Gagnon, 1993; Watts, 1999), intergovernmental relations involve actors who seem to be nailed to a particular level of government.[1] The relations between these levels and the institutions they consist of are purely structural. Even in the field of regional studies, where elites have recently made a comeback as crucial political actors, it is hardly ever acknowledged that professional politics is nurturing a career interest within professional politicians and that their outlook and self-interest may thus be less determined by a specific institutional perspective than by their career ambition and the position they want to hold in the future (e.g. Keating, 1998: 59–60). Such a static understanding clearly does not stand the test of empirical reality. As a result, studies of federalism or regionalism—or more generally, studies of multi-level governance (cf. Hooghe and Marks, 2003)—would do better by developing an understanding of how political careers affect institutions and their relations.

The benign neglect of individual careers also still figures prominently in European legislative analysis. The idea that careers of individuals tell us something about the political system has never been held in high regard in Germany, for example. Some notable exemptions from the rule (for example, Molt, 1963; Kaack, 1971; Herzog, 1975) notwithstanding, German political science has always doubted the thesis that individuals matter in a system that is so clearly dominated by collective interests, especially by parties. If MPs almost always vote the party line, why study them and their career paths? Quite tellingly, Klaus von Beyme (1998) titled his analysis of the Bundestag, *The Legislator*[2]—in the singular.

Studies of political careers, on the other hand, have two major problems that prevent them from understanding the relationship between careers and institutions. Both problems involve a perspective that is overly static, somewhat surprising in a field that—by definition—studies movement. On the one hand students of political careers mostly focus on the national level and, more precisely, on the national legislature (cf. Hibbing, 1991; Prinz, 1993: 34–42; Borchert, 1999; Best and Cotta, 2000; Borchert and Zeiss, 2003). The connection seems natural, but if we take a closer look in fact it is quite peculiar. If a career implies movement—usually movement perceived as upward—then it would seem strange that we look at only one place. True, there are careers to be made within national parliament, from freshman to Speaker, from rookie to committee chair, from backbencher to party leader or government minister. Yet that is only part of the story.

Careers start much earlier than with entry into the national parliament. Usually, they involve local politics; often they include regional or state politics. Recruitment into political office is followed by recruitment into professional political office. This is a very important step indeed, as professionalism breeds careerism. It is with professionalization that things like a guaranteed and regular income, the chance to maintain a political office, and the chance to rise within the hierarchy of offices become major considerations for political actors. Nor do careers end with the voluntary or involuntary decision to leave the national legislature. Often enough there are other positions in or near the political realm into which former MPs go (cf. Hibbing, 1999: 150–151). Yet this is a point we know precious little about, as there are not many studies on the whereabouts of former legislators in any country. All in all there is a strong national-level bias in studies of political careers.

This bias is far less pronounced in the USA compared to Europe. After all, studies of state legislatures and their personnel are a growth industry (cf. Squire, 1988, 1993; Moncrief and Thompson, 1992; Rosenthal, 1998). Yet mandates on the state level are treated for the most part as a thing apart from positions on the national or on the local level. In that they mirror the limited focus of Congressional research analysing only those moving into the orbit of their studies and only as long as they remain there. Thus, we do know about the important distinction between springboard legislatures and career legislatures (Squire, 1988), but not about the full course of the careers that are being made in both cases. This is somewhat surprising, since the one classic study that in many ways triggered the interest in political careers avoided the national bias as much as it did avoid another fallacy I will turn to in a moment. Joseph Schlesinger's (1966) *Ambition and Politics* looked at the careers of people who made it to the national level, but he did not restrict the scope of his analysis to this level. He wanted to know where Senators (and Governors) came from and which way they came into that office.

And that precisely points to the second fallacy in which many analyses are trapped: they have a clearly defined institutional focus and hence are static in their conception of careers. The underlying assumption is a close connection between careerism and institutionalization. As some path-breaking articles, such as Polsby's (1968), found an empirical correlation between increasing length of service in the US House of Representatives and the institutionalization of that body, the tacit inference was that careers and the development of one institution were always inextricably linked. From that perspective it made perfect sense to first choose an institution and then study the behaviour of its members. (Plus, it is much easier to do empirically.)

Thus, while the difference between American and European research on legislatures is often portrayed as one between an individualist and an institutionalist perspective, we have to amend that idea: American legislative studies concentrate on *individuals within an institution*—'careerism in one institution', so to speak. This particular perspective is based on a correct observation: that many American politicians tend to make a choice of institutions quite early in their careers and then stay on. Yet this was far from a universal law even before term limits—and is much less so now. Viewed either historically (taking into regard nineteenth-century political careers in the USA) or comparatively (looking at other countries), careerism in one institution does not help us much to understand the dynamics and specific patterns of political careers (Hibbing, 1999: 157–160). European researchers, on the other hand, have tended to disregard careerism altogether. Schlesinger's (1966: 1) laconic theory that 'ambition lies at the heart of politics' simply did not seem a promising approach to them. For a number of reasons, then, we know very little about political careers in multi-level systems and about the relationship between careers and levels of government more generally.

This unsatisfactory state of the art has been the starting point for the research efforts culminating in this special issue. Following Schlesinger, it is our contention that political careers and the ambitions guiding these careers are inextricably linked to the institutional opportunity structures provided by each political system. The central aim of all the contributions gathered in this issue has thus been to explore just how individual ambitions translate into collective career patterns by way of institutional structure of opportunities.

This task includes first and foremost to identify the dominant career pattern(s) in each system. Analysing career movement of politicians in their respective country, authors were to answer a number of questions.

- To what extent do typical political careers link different territorial levels of government?
- Which direction do career movements between them typically take?
- To what extent do careers involve different types of institutions (legislatures, executives, parties, interest groups)?
- Are there specific links between level of government and type of institution?
- Do careers consist mainly of offices held one after another (succession) or is there also a considerable practice of office accumulation?
- Is there one all-embracing career model, or do patterns vary significantly across region, party, social group or over time.

Once empirical career patterns have been identified, authors are to explain them with reference to the opportunity structure. While individual contributions may emphasize different institutional features, they all place them within a common analytical framework set out by Borchert in this issue. Thus, the exact position of political offices on the virtual career ladder is explained with reference to their availability, their accessibility and their attractiveness. These three A's, however, in turn, are seen to be dependent on a whole range of institutional features. For analytical purposes they are divided into four different aspects: the state structure (e.g. unitary vs. federal), the structure of representation (e.g. electoral system), the institutional structure (e.g. legislative–executive relations) and, finally, the organizational structure (e.g. the role of parties). Applying this framework to their case studies, authors are able to explore the causal mechanisms that link specific elements of the opportunity structure with individual behaviour of politicians.

In this special issue we have deliberately chosen to expand the spectrum of cases beyond the usual suspects. Case studies include not only the classical federal systems in Europe and North America (here Germany, Canada and the USA), but also newly regionalized/federalized countries in Europe (here Spain and the UK) and the rarely studied post-dictatorial federal democracies of Southern America (here represented by Brazil). While our list is obviously not exhaustive, it covers a wide range of multi-level systems, both in terms of their geographical distribution (Europe, North and South America) and their institutional variation (regionalized vs. federal system, dual federalism vs. co-operative federalism, presidential vs. parliamentary system). This makes not only for interesting reading but also allows us to compare these different types and thus to arrive at a more comprehensive picture of political careers in multi-level systems.

In the opening article, Jens Borchert provides a conceptual framework for the country chapters to follow. Taking his cue from Joseph Schlesinger's (1966) classical treatment, Borchert proposes to take individual ambition and institutional opportunity as the two components defining career patterns in a given system. The structure of opportunity is characterized by (a) the availability, (b) the accessibility and (c) the attractiveness of offices in a polity. While availability is fixed (unless changed by

institutional reform), accessibility and attractiveness are relative categories involving difficult choices of actors based on the costs and benefits involved. Ambition, on the other hand, may be broken down into a monetary interest (having a professional income from politics), career advancement (reaching positions of more power and higher status) and career maintenance (remaining in the game and thus within the political profession). Individual career choices then form systemic patterns involving high or low levels of movement between institutions, a certain direction of movement, and different degrees of linkage between institutions. The author discerns three such patterns: a unilinear pattern involving a clearly defined and universally shared career ladder, an alternative pattern based on several separate career arenas drawing different contenders and, finally, an integrated career pattern with one big playing field with no clear hierarchy between offices.

This novel approach is then applied to the countries studied in the following articles. Gary Copeland and Cynthia Opheim introduce the readers to the land of the classical springboard career pattern: the USA. Based on a solid description of this unidirectional pattern and its institutional preconditions, the authors focus on the legislative careers of women and African Americans. Both of these groups are still significantly under-represented in US legislatures, yet both have made considerable inroads with regard to legislative representation. Copeland and Opheim's study shows their opportunity structures to be not only different from that of white men, but also from each other. Nevertheless, the analysis also clearly shows that the dominant career pattern for white men is also the dominant model for women and African Americans. In fact, the particular conditions under which African Americans generally win a seat (i.e. a clear African American majority in the electorate) makes them even more likely to build up a step-by-step career. This unidirectional career path, allowing for a continuous institutional political socialization along the way, is finally presented as one of the most important reasons why the political class of the USA has been able to maintain its shared values and identity despite the influx of women and African-Americans.

Fabiano Santos and Fabiano Pegurier focus on the combined effects that Brazilian federalism and the country's electoral system have on career patterns. They find a system in which careers are characterized by multiple changes of office usually involving several levels of government and both the executive and the legislative branch of government. Federalism provides for a great number of available offices and in its Brazilian type puts a premium on executive positions. The electoral system is a highly personalized open-list proportional representation (PR) system allowing for party alliances. This system puts career politicians at a high risk of losing their position at election time. It thus discourages static ambition and forces politicians to make all kinds of strategic calculations. As a result, Santos and Pegurier find the Chamber of Deputies not to be the final goal of political careers in Brazil. But, contrary to some views recently put forward by American political scientists, it retains an important place both as a stepping-stone to executive office and as a place one might want to return to after a stint in the executive at the federal, state or even local level.

Looking at Canada, David Docherty finds a structure of opportunity undergoing profound change. Whereas in the other countries change seems to be rather incremental, Canada has seen a paradigmatic shift in career patterns in recent years. Before the

changes the federal and the provincial level in Canada used to be clearly separated from each other, mostly because federal and provincial party organizations in most provinces were distinct entities. Political careers thus focused on one level from the outset. Hence, there was no career ladder between levels of government. Careers also were rather short by international comparison. The reason for this was that the ultimate career goal was the executive, and legislative seniority did not provide an advantage to reach that goal. Things have changed with the restructuring of the Canadian party system caused by the merger of the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservative Party into the Conservative Party of Canada in 2003. Since then there has been a notable increase in party switches resulting from the successful attempt of the federal parties to attract prominent members of different provincial parties—with some federal politicians moving the other way and running for provincial office. Overall, the career structure has become much more permeable, offering ample space for political entrepreneurs of all stripes.

Jens Borchert and Klaus Stolz view political careers in Germany from a rather unfamiliar perspective. In contrast to most other studies in this field they start their investigation at the state level. This makes sense as due to a considerable process of institutional professionalization in state parliaments, state legislators represent a far more representative group of professional politicians in Germany than members of the federal parliament. Furthermore, by looking at pathways to the state legislatures, strategies to remain there (including office accumulation) and trajectories of career advancement from a state mandate, the authors substitute a mainly institution-centred perspective for a dynamic career perspective. Their main finding is also rather contra-intuitive. Despite an institutional structure that allows for high levels of permeability between different territorial levels of government in Germany, there is actually very limited movement. The immense professionalization of state politics, a certain regionalization of the party system and some other factors seem to have rendered state legislatures (and state politics in general) into career aims in their own right.

In his contribution, Klaus Stolz takes account of the emerging multi-level career patterns following the recent regionalization of two of Europe's traditional unitary states: Spain and the UK. Focusing on the so-called 'stateless nations' of Catalonia and Scotland, he compares two cases where strong regionalism intersects with the professional career interests of regional politicians. In both these cases regionalism has played its part in shaping institutional structures and individual perceptions that are highly favourable for the pursuit of regionally rather than nationally orientated political careers—something found only very rarely in traditional federal systems. However, due to the markedly different institutionalization of professional politics in Spain and the UK—the former based more directly on political parties, the latter on public offices in legislative institutions—this common regional career orientation results in vastly different career patterns. Catalan political careers are pursued in a highly integrated arena comprising the Catalan and the Spanish level, whereas parliaments in the UK are highly bounded institutions, providing for alternative rather than integrated career patterns. In addition to identifying these patterns, Stolz illuminates the mechanisms that link individual preferences and institutional opportunity structures.

Klaus Detterbeck complements our analyses on political careers by bringing an explicit party perspective to the issue. In contrast to all other studies, where political

parties are generally referred to as the main gatekeepers for public offices, he concentrates on political careers pursued within parties themselves. Starting from the assumption that particular forms of territorial order may be related to particular patterns of party careers, Detterbeck engages in a paired comparison of two joint and two dual federations (Germany and Austria and Australia and Canada, respectively). His focus is on the vertical linkages that are provided by the accumulation and sequence of offices held at state and federal level within a party. Looking for differences and similarities between countries yet also between party families, he reveals some interesting results. Career patterns in these four traditional federal systems differ considerably. In order to explain these differences, though, recourse to institutional variables is not enough. Instead, it is only when party tradition and situational factors are integrated that a clearer picture emerges. Furthermore, the considerable differences that exist in career patterns between federal parties in turn suggest that there is no uniform political role for political parties with regard to the working of the federal system.

This issue has a rather long history, including panels at international conferences and a very productive authors' conference at a former monastery in Bavaria. The latter was generously funded by the Volkswagen Stiftung, for which we are very grateful. For crucial support and encouragement during various stages of the project, we would like to thank Marion Reiser. For editorial assistance and data updates, we thank Christin Hauschildt and Mandy Rönicke. All papers have gone through an intensive and extensive review process, during which they had to be revised and updated more than once. Thus, we would like to thank all contributors, as well as the journal publishers, for their continuing efforts and patience. We hope readers will agree that this final product was worth the while.

Notes

[1]For an exception to the rule, see Lehmbruch (1998: 86–88), who briefly considers career patterns as a possible moment of political integration across levels of government, but then denies their relevance in the German case.

[2]The German original could even be translated as 'The Lawmaker'.

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