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Klaus H. Goetz; Jan-Hinrik Meyer-Sahling

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# Political time in the EU: dimensions, perspectives, theories

Klaus H. Goetz and Jan-Hinrik Meyer-Sahling

**ABSTRACT** The manner in which time is institutionalized is critical to how a political system works. Terms, time budgets and time horizons of collective and individual political actors; rights over timing, sequencing and speed in decision-making; and the temporal properties of policy matter to the distribution of power; efficiency and effectiveness of policy-making; and democratic legitimacy. This article makes a case for the systematic study of political time in the European Union (EU) – both as an independent and a dependent variable – and highlights the analytical value-added of a time-centred analysis. The article discusses previous scholarship on the institutionalization of political time and its consequences along the dimensions of polity, politics and policy; and then reviews dominant perspectives on political time, which centre on power, system performance and legitimacy. These perspectives tie in with diverse theoretical traditions in the study of the EU. Taken together, dimensions, perspectives and theories help to guide time-centred analyses of the EU political system.

**KEY WORDS** EU; EU timescape; legitimacy; performance; political time; power.

## WHY STUDY POLITICAL TIME?<sup>1</sup>

The Council of Ministers of the European Union (EU) is a permanent institution, but its presidency changes every six months. Members of the European Parliament (EP) are elected for a five-year term, but key posts in the EP – including those of the President, the Vice-President and committee chairs – are reallocated in mid-term. The President of the Commission and the Commissioners are appointed for five years, but most of the staff with whom they work are appointed on a permanent basis. The six members of the Executive Board of the European Central Bank (ECB) serve non-renewable eight-year terms, but their terms are staggered, i.e. scheduled to end in 2010, May and October 2011, and 2012, 2013 and 2014. The sequence as well as the respective rights and responsibilities of the Commission, the EP and the Council in the legislative process are subject to detailed provisions, but leave great scope for the acceleration of decisions, for instance, in the shape of so-called ‘early agreements’ under the co-decision procedure (see Corbett *et al.* 2007: 224ff.). Parliament, unlike the Council, is not a permanent institution, but legislation still pending at the end of a legislative term is routinely carried over into the newly elected legislature, so that the ‘discontinuity

principle' applied in most national legislatures is effectively suspended (Kovats 2009). Both the Commission and the Parliament have five-year mandates, but the parameters of the EU budget are determined through the multi-annual financial perspective in a seven-year cycle.

It is our central contention that these and many other temporal features of the EU political system deserve more sustained and systematic study than they have received so far. There is much to be gained from according political time a central place in EU scholarship: if we understand better 'how the EU ticks' (Goetz 2009), we will also gain insights into how it distributes opportunities for effective participation in decision-making; why it is good at doing some things – say, creating a single market – but bad at others – say, the promotion of growth and employment (Kok Report 2004); and why some of its procedures are seen as more legitimate than others. Put differently: research into the 'EU timescape' (see Meyer-Sahling and Goetz 2009) – both as a 'dependent' and an 'independent' variable – raises new questions about the EU and it opens up novel perspectives on long-standing debates.

Our main concern is *not* with historical analysis, in the sense of explaining developments *over time*, an interest that has featured prominently in EU studies, both in integration theory – most notably in neo-functionalism and historical institutionalist accounts of integration – and also in historical institutionalist policy analysis. As Bulmer's (2009) discussion in this volume makes clear, however, there are fruitful connections to be made between the study of 'politics in time' (Pierson 2004) and an agenda centred on political time and political timescapes. Nor do we focus on the impact of the past on the present – of 'governing with the past' – the importance of which Pollitt (2008) has recently emphasized in the context of administrative and policy analysis. Nor do we have much to say on how unforeseen and unforeseeable events, crises and 'bolts from the blue' may play havoc with well-laid plans and timetables. Rather, we are interested in the temporal features that are built into the political system of the EU and in how the specific manner in which they are institutionalized matter for power, performance and legitimacy.

By treating time as an institutional property we privilege an interest in temporal rules (broadly understood) and the temporal features of procedures. These can, of course, vary in precision, formality and authority (Stone Sweet *et al.* 2001: 6–7). We, therefore, share in the mainstream of institutionalist approaches to the study of Europe, which think of institutions as 'the structure in which social interaction – as opposed to random encounters – takes place; they tend to pattern behaviour in particular ways . . . institutions make purposive action possible by providing individuals with a framework of shared expectations' (Stone Sweet *et al.* 2001 : 7). But we argue that the importance of time as an institution has been neglected in EU scholarship.

At the same time, we have to recognize that it is not always easy to determine unambiguously the analytical status of political time within the context of variable-oriented research designs that seek to distinguish clearly between independent, dependent and, possibly, intervening variables. For example, if we were to

ask how the time horizon of a Commissioner affects the legislative initiatives that s/he is likely to undertake, we are bound to encounter feedback loops, in the sense that initiatives already undertaken influence future time horizons. Where aspects of time – be they terms, time budgets, time horizons, time rules in decision-making or temporal properties of policy – are used to explain something else, their effects can often only be detected through observation over longer periods of time during which ‘effect may become cause’ (Pierson 2004). Moreover, the effects of such temporal features of a political system can rarely be understood without reference to substance – what is substantively at stake – and also to space (especially important in a multi-level setting). This is why research into the institutionalization of political time and its effects needs to ‘foreground’ time (Adam 2008), but cannot necessarily treat it as a discreet variable.

Bearing in mind these analytical challenges, the success of previous efforts to put political time at the heart of comparative analysis has not been encouraging. As Schedler and Santiso (1998) noted in their ‘invitation’ from the late 1990s to concentrate research on ‘political time’, ‘[t]ime in its manifold manifestations represents a pervasive factor in political life’, but ‘as a rule, reflections on politics and time have remained unsystematic, implicit, and disperse, and our theoretical insights, conceptual tools, and empirical knowledge have remained severely limited’ (Schedler and Santiso 1998: 5). A major German-language monograph on contemporary political time in national democratic settings published by Riescher (1994) has largely failed to inspire further empirical analysis. Similarly, the insightful work by Ekengren (1996, 1997, 2002) on the time of EU governance did not spark a wider discussion on the specific properties of political time in the EU and its consequences for the member states.

It is, perhaps, the ubiquity of political time that has tended to discourage its systematic analysis. For example, Schedler and Santiso’s (1998) attempt to outline a future research agenda encompassed a very wide range of issues related to political time, including politicians’ time horizons, the role of time constraints, the importance of institutional time rules, time strategies and also time discourses. The temporal categories that can be analysed are, in themselves, numerous. Empirical work has addressed issues of temporal location (when does something happen?); sequence (in what order do things happen?); speed (how quickly do things happen?) (Schmitter and Santiso 1998), and also duration (how long do things take?). But there are a host of other temporal features that matter in political life, including, for example, deadlining and punctuality, rates of recurrence, and, in particular, cycles and rhythms (Meyer-Sahling 2007).

Yet much of what we know so far about political time relates to differences between national political regimes (Schedler and Santiso 1998; Riescher 1994). Linz (1998) has reminded us that government *pro tempore* is a – or perhaps *the* – defining feature of democracies. Governments in non-democratic regimes do not face a similar constraint. ‘The pro-tempore character of democratic government makes it essential that elections take place with reasonable

frequency' (Linz 1998: 21). The limited time budget resulting from regular elections makes time a 'scarce resource' (Linz 1998: 22) in democratic politics and democratic politicians, in particular, a 'harried elite' (Linz 1998: 29). Following Linz, this inbuilt restriction of democratic time has a profound impact on the temporal ordering of the activities of governments and parliaments. Their term of office provides political decision-makers with an overall time budget, which they need to allocate wisely if they wish to be re-elected. It also marks their most important time horizon. What to do when, in what sequence, how speedily and for how long are, accordingly, enduring political preoccupations. In short, the electoral term is the most fundamental time unit of democracy and the electoral cycle to which the democratic limitation of time gives rise is its defining temporal feature.

Democracy's time constraint not only works at the polity level, notably the institutional terms of governments and legislatures. Time also matters at the levels of politics and policy. As regards the former, temporal rules governing political decision-making are of special significance. A good deal of work has, for example, examined how time rules in parliaments – notably as they affect the timing of legislative initiatives – influence the distribution of power both between the executive and parliament and within the legislature (for example Döring 1995, 2003, 2004). As regards the policy dimension, policy timing has been an enduring theme. Here, one thinks immediately of work on political business cycles, which has noted the link between electoral rules and resultant time budgets and time horizons of political decision-makers, on the one hand, and the 'opportunistic' timing of economic policy tools, on the other (for a review of much of this work, see Drazen 2001).

The case for analysing political time is supported by the fact that political time is intimately connected to power, system performance and legitimacy. The link between time rules and the allocation of power is probably too apparent to require much comment; but time rules also matter for the efficiency and effectiveness of political decision-making and political legitimacy. To recognize this point it may suffice to remind ourselves briefly of Hamilton's comments on 'The Duration in Office of the Executive' in the *Federalist Papers* No. 71. The argument in favour of a four-year term for an elected 'magistrate' (i.e. chief executive) rests on the likelihood that it will ensure the 'firmness and independence of the magistrate':

It cannot be affirmed, that a duration of four years, or any other limited duration, would completely answer the end proposed; but it would contribute towards it in a degree which would have a material influence upon the spirit and character of the government. Between the commencement and termination of such a period, there would always be a considerable interval, in which the prospect of annihilation would be sufficiently remote, not to have an improper effect upon the conduct of a man indued with a tolerable portion of fortitude; and in which he might reasonably promise himself, that there would be time enough before it arrived, to make the community

sensible of the propriety of the measures he might incline to pursue . . . on the one hand, a duration of four years will contribute to the firmness of the Executive in a sufficient degree to render it a very valuable ingredient in the composition; so, on the other, it is not enough to justify any alarm for the public liberty.

In today's EU setting, very similar considerations are brought to bear when it comes to assessing its temporal features, though the way in which they are expressed is, of course, quite different. Thus, to give just two examples, the increasing duration of law-making is often seen as a sign of inefficient decision-making (König 2007; Kovats 2009), whilst the introduction of an elaborate multi-annual planning cycle in the Commission has been justified on grounds of better governance (Tholoniati 2009). As regards legitimacy, time rules relating to, for example, the rights of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and parliamentary groups in the legislative process are of critical relevance when it comes to assessing claims about the EU's democratization through parliamentarization. In short, the analysis of political time leads us to the core of contemporary scholarly and political debates about power, performance and legitimacy in the EU (Hix 2008; Menon 2008).

Against this background, this special issue of the *Journal of European Public Policy* makes the case for a more systematic study of time in the EU. In this introductory article, we first review previous scholarship on the institutionalization of political time and its consequences along the dimensions of polity, politics and policy. For each of the three dimensions, we identify the main properties and provide examples from debates in comparative politics and debates surrounding the EU political system. Second, we discuss dominant perspectives on political time, which centre on power, system performance and legitimacy. These perspectives tie in with different theoretical traditions in the study of the EU, which we discuss in our last section. Taken together, dimensions, perspectives and theories help to identify key questions in time-centred analyses of the EU political system, an issue that is taken up again in the conclusion (Meyer-Sahling and Goetz 2009) to this special issue.

## **INSTITUTIONALIZING POLITICAL TIME: POLITY, POLITICS AND POLICY**

In its substantive emphases, previous scholarship on political time has tended to coincide fairly closely with the widely accepted distinction between polity, politics and policy dimensions in the analysis of political systems. This distinction has also been applied in the study of the EU (e.g., Hix 2005) and in much recent work on the Europeanization of domestic political systems (see, e.g., Goetz and Meyer-Sahling 2008; Graziano and Vink 2007). The three dimensions are concerned, respectively, with term lengths and configurations of political and senior administrative officeholders, their time budgets and time horizons; rights to influence the timing, sequencing, speed and duration of political

decision-making processes; and the temporal properties of public policy, such as transposition deadlines or the duration of temporary derogations.

### **Polity: terms, time budgets, and time horizons**

In a democracy, the most fundamental temporal unit is the electoral term, the maximum length of which tends to be fixed at the level of the constitution. The electoral term on which their temporal mandate is based determines the time budgets available to elected politicians; and, although they may, of course, plan beyond the next election date, it also exerts a major influence on their time horizons in office. The limitation on the length of terms of elected politicians (and often also other senior officeholders in non-majoritarian institutions such as courts or central banks) has a profound effect on how the key political institutions – government and parliament – organize their work over the electoral term, i.e. decisional cycles; and on the timing, sequencing, speed and duration of public policies, i.e. policy cycles. The electoral cycle, which combines decisional and policy aspects, thus constitutes the basic rhythm of a democratic political system, as it reflects recurring patterns of political processes, marked by a clear beginning and an end.

Given the far-reaching consequences of how terms are arranged, it is surprising that cross-country differences in terms, time budgets and associated time horizons do not feature prominently in comparative typologies of political systems. To be sure, it has been noted that the distinction between presidential and parliamentary systems has a temporal dimension (Riescher 1994). Whilst in parliamentary systems, parliament and government operate on the basis of the same time budget (a fact which helps to synchronize their respective timetables), this is not the case in presidential systems (the US is the paradigmatic case here). In the former, terms and cycles of parliament and government are aligned or, more precisely, synchronized. In presidential systems, by contrast, the terms of legislators and chief executives do not coincide. The lack of synchronization of electoral cycles has, accordingly, been identified as a major source of divided government in presidential systems (Shugart 1995). But the typological distinction between presidentialism and parliamentarism itself is oblivious to this basic difference in the institutionalization of political time. Similarly, the distinction between majoritarian and consensus democracies (Lijphart 1999) does not explicitly engage with the temporal constitution of these two ideal-types.

This is not to suggest, of course, that political scientists have ignored the importance of terms, time budgets and time horizons. For example, studies of constitution-making in countries that have undergone transitions from authoritarianism to democracy have analysed the importance of the choice of term lengths and term limits of parliamentarians, governments and, especially, presidents (Frye 1997; Shugart and Carey 1992). Students of executive–legislative relations have inquired into the impact of electorally restricted time budgets on how politicians time legislative initiatives over the parliamentary term (Martin 2004); similar work is now done on legislative planning within central executives (Zubek *et al.* 2007).

Of equal relevance is work that has inquired into how 'non-majoritarian' political institutions work (Thatcher and Sweet Stone 2002). The defining characteristic of such institutions is that they do operate at some remove from direct control by elected officials and, by implication, at a greater distance from a direct, time-limited electoral mandate. The most oft-discussed institution of this kind includes agencies, central banks and courts. Non-majoritarian institutions do not fit easily within the democratic chain of delegation (Strøm *et al.* 2003), nor, and this is crucial, are they subject to the same time budgets and time horizons as majoritarian, i.e. electorally based institutions. It is their capacity to take the 'longer view' and to operate at least partly outside the constraints of electoral terms that provides their key functional justification.

Within the context of the EU, non-majoritarian institutions – notably the Court, the ECB and a host of EU agencies – have received a great deal of attention, as part of the discussion of the EU as a 'regulatory state' (Majone 1997) and the emergence of a 'new executive politics in Europe' (Egeberg 2006; Curtin and Egeberg 2008). Analyses of the EU as a regulatory state draw attention to two of its features: what it does substantively; and how it is institutionalized. Similarly, analysts of the new European executive order highlight the importance of a wide variety of agencies and international and transnational policy networks in the EU, which, again, are much less sensitive to the constraints on electorally limited terms than analyses of democratic chains of delegation might suggest.

Yet, if we examine terms, time budgets and time horizons of key actors in the EU system we find a complex and partly contradictory picture (Goetz 2009), not least because, compared to basic term rules at national level, temporal rules in the EU have been fairly dynamic. On the one hand, electoral terms seem to matter progressively more. The key points here are the introduction of direct quinquennial elections to the EP in 1979 and the synchronization of the term lengths of the EP and the College of Commissioners under the Maastricht Treaty, so that both now operate within the same basic time budget. At the level of policy planning, the five-year planning cycle instituted in the Commission has further helped to synchronize activities between the Commission and Parliament. On the other, continuity, ongoingness and extended time horizons also have very powerful institutional bases, notably in the Commission – think, for example, of the powerful Commission bureaucracy or comitology – and in the Council, for instance, in the form of the Committee of *Permanent* Representatives (COREPER) and the Secretariat-General. Moreover, the ECB makes much of the long, secure tenure of the members of its Executive Board – eight years – and governors of national central banks, who belong to its Governing Council, must have a minimum term of office of five years.

But the picture is more complicated than a simple opposition between institutions and actors that are more or less directly subject to electorally limited terms and those operating to varying degrees outside such constraints would

suggest. Central to analysis of the mobilization of actors in the EU is the operation of the six-monthly presidencies of the Council, which rotate amongst the member states (Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace 2006). It is the short term of the Council presidency, in particular, that introduces urgency into Council proceedings and often turns the Council into an 'impatient legislator' (Rittberger 2000) when compared to other participants in the EU legislative process that possess a larger time budget and longer time horizons. From this perspective, we might expect that the introduction of the two-and-a-half-year President of the European Council as envisaged by the Lisbon Treaty, rather than making the work of the Council more efficient and effective, might, in fact, serve to slow it down, as the sense of urgency created by a tightly limited six-month term evaporates. The central concern in the analysis of terms (their length and configuration), time budgets and time horizons then relates to the temporal outlook which they impose on collective and individual actors, how they influence their (scope of) actions, and what consequences they have for political outcomes.

### **Politics: time for decision-making**

Much work on political time has focused on its property as a resource and a constraint in decision-making, notably in legislative procedures. What matters critically in this respect is the malleability and manipulability of time. As Schmitter and Santiso (1998: 71) have noted in relation to democratization, decision-makers 'learn how to manipulate time, that is, to turn it from an inexorably limited, linear and perishable constraint into something that could be scheduled, anticipated, delayed, accelerated, deadlined, circumvented, prolonged, deferred, compressed, parcelled out, standardized, diversified, staged, staggered, and even wasted – but never ignored'.

Decision-making analyses that pay attention to temporal rules direct attention to how political actors may seek to influence the temporal structure of decision-making both within and between institutions. These time rights include the power to initiate and thus to influence the timing for the start of the policy-making process; they refer to sequences in decision-making – a prominent concern in both rationalist and historical institutionalist analyses – and they are interested in possibilities to accelerate or delay. Time rules provide opportunities for some and create constraints for others. Along the politics dimensions, time is fundamentally about the discretion to make time-related choices in order to gain an advantage in political processes.

For example, with regard to inter-institutional relations, government control of parliamentary timetables has been analysed as a key resource for government to impose its will on parliament (Cox 2005; Döring 1995). Recent research has also identified different patterns of allocating time to the processing of bills in parliament. In Hungary and the UK, for instance, the government controls not only the timetable of parliament, but it is also unusual for the opposition parties to be given committee and plenary time for the consideration of their initiatives.

By contrast, in countries such as Germany and Poland, it is common practice that legislative time is allocated proportionally between government and opposition (Zubek 2008).

The power to use time in the political process has also been an important component of the political dynamics within institutions. Studies of committee–floor relations in the US Congress, for instance, have drawn attention to questions of sequencing and timing in parliamentary decision-making (Shepsle and Weingast 1987). Within government, recent research has examined legislative planning procedures that allocate time rights to central actors such as Prime Minister’s Offices to determine the timing of legislative proposals, the sequence and generally the overall amount of time that will be devoted to individual bill proposals before they can be passed on to parliament (Zubek *et al.* 2007).

The importance of time for decisional politics – perhaps most notably legislative politics – has also, not surprisingly, been recognized in the study of the legislative process of the EU. The right of the Commission to initiate proposals gives the Commission the power to choose the timing for initiating new policies. This time right remains recognized in the Treaties, although it has also been partly undermined in practice (Rasmussen 2007a). The right of the EP to give an opinion under the consultation procedure has often been labelled as a ‘power to delay’ (Kardasheva 2008), which has historically been an important resource for Parliament in the legislative process (Corbett *et al.* 2007). As already noted, the ‘lack of time’ has, on the other hand, often been an important constraint for the Council in the negotiations with Parliament, because the shorter terms of Council presidencies have turned the Council into an ‘impatient legislator’ relative to the EP (Rittberger 2000). At the same time, the Council has, of course, the right to conclude the legislative process and failure to do so means that a bill cannot pass. In short, at the EU level, time rights are shared among the three core institutions, in that each of them has an important right to influence the temporal structure of the legislative process.

Time-related issues have also gained a great deal of attention with regard to the politics within EU institutions. For instance, *rapporteurs* are in a central position within the EP to accelerate the co-decision procedure in order to broker an early agreement with the Council (Héritier and Farrell 2004). Within the Commission, officials can take advantage of their permanence *vis-à-vis* EU Commissioners who are appointed for five-year terms. Commission officials can use this temporal advantage strategically, in that they can delay the policy-making process and wait for a Directorate-General (DG) leadership that is more favourable to their views. Commission officials are also known to become more reluctant to introduce new ideas and proposals at the end of a Commissioner’s term, as there is too much uncertainty over the preferences of the succeeding Commissioner (Tholoniati 2009).

In contrast to the sustained interest in the instrumental use of time rules in decision-making – powers to move first or last, to change sequences, to accelerate or delay, to conclude or to keep processes open, etc. – political scientists have paid less attention to the dense grid of regular meetings in which politicians

and officials spend much of their time. A first glance shows that the sheer frequency of meetings differs from one institution to another. The College of Commissioners, for instance, meets once a week; COREPER I and II meet once a week, but may meet for more than a day; the Council in its various configurations meets somewhat less regularly, but several times a month, and there are also regular informal ministerial meetings organized by the EU Presidency; the European Council meets two times during a six-monthly presidency, with one or two additional informal meetings of the heads of state and government; the EP meets for 12 four-day sessions in Strasbourg and six additional two-day sessions in Brussels; the Governing Council of the ECB meets twice a month.

The importance of dense schedules of regular meetings can hardly be overstated. They provide a temporal grid into which much decision-making has to be fitted. They set the basic rhythm for the work of the key EU institutions and also constrain the discretionary use of time in the member states, notably of executives and parliaments (Ekengren 2002; Jerneck 2000). They mobilize actors and are a routinized means of addressing intra-institutional and inter-institutional problems of synchronization.

Understanding time along the politics dimension thus requires attention both to opportunities for the instrumental use of time rules and to temporal grids. The latter create regularity, predictability, mobilize and synchronize actors; the former allow for flexibility and can be used both to lessen constraints or in an attempt to reduce temporal discretion. In the present context, the challenge for students of the EU is to gain greater insights into how decisional time rules and temporal grids work and, in line with our institutional outlook on time, how they 'pattern behaviour' within the EU system.

### **Policy: allocation in time**

Along the policy dimension, political time is centrally concerned with the temporal allocation of values in society. EU policy, like national policy, provides an almost infinite number of examples for the intricate temporal structuring of policy. To give just one example, the reform of the Common Market Organization for wine, which came into force on 1 August 2008, foresees, amongst many other measures, that planning rights schemes 'are to be abolished by the end of 2015, with the possibility to continue them at a national level until 2018'; distillation schemes are to be phased out, with 'crisis distillation ... limited to four years at Member States' discretion until the end of 2011/2012, with maximum expenditure limited to 20 percent of the national financial envelope in year one, 15 percent in year two, 10 percent in year three and 5 percent in year four'; and a 'three-year voluntary grubbing-up scheme for a total area of 175,000 hectares with a decreasing level of premium over the three years' ([http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/capreform/wine/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/capreform/wine/index_en.htm); accessed 24 August 2008).

The key issue along the policy dimension is then: when, in what sequence, how quickly and for how long are benefits to be provided and costs to be

imposed? When should a new directive come into force? In what sequence should EU measures for combatting climate change be implemented and what is the appropriate time scale for action? How quickly should transitional arrangements be phased out? How long should a temporary derogation last?

Time rules are thus applied as tools of governance. They determine basic parameters such as the timing, start and end dates of policies. However, time rules are also used to address temporal dilemmas inherent to public policies. For instance, we have already noted how the debate on non-majoritarian institutions stresses their superiority in ensuring temporal consistency when compared to institutional solutions that are more closely related to the electoral cycle and, thus, more likely to be subject to behaviour that follows political business cycles. Thus, economists stress the benefits of politically independent central banks, because they take monetary policy instruments out of the hands of elected politicians with short-term interests (Kydlund and Prescott 1977, McNamara 2002). Dyson (2009) shows how this discourse has influenced the institutionalization of European economic and monetary governance, but also how such time rules remain contested.

More generally, it is often argued that the last two decades have seen a marked shift towards the establishment of non-majoritarian agencies (Thatcher and Stone-Sweet 2002) at both national level and within the EU as a 'regulatory state' (Majone 1997). The desire to overcome problems of credible commitment, which are closely connected to relatively short, electorally determined time horizons, is often seen as a major force behind this institutional shift (Gilardi 2002). Delegation to independent regulatory agencies is then used as a tool to enhance temporal consistency.

If such temporal features of policy are to be treated as part of the institutional make-up of the EU, the question arises as to whether it is possible to detect regularities of EU policy time. At this stage, we may formulate three general expectations relating to the temporality of EU policy. A first expectation is that, on the whole, EU policy is more likely to be time consistent than policy at the national level, which is more closely controlled by majoritarian institutions. There has arguably been a trend towards establishing policy continuity and towards the reduction of time tools in the hands of politicians at the EU level. EU policies, as Goetz (2009) argues in more detail, tend to favour continuity through delegation and through the establishment of programmes that commit Commissioners, MEPs and Council members to think and act beyond their term in office. We would expect that policy in the EU is less likely to be subject to electorally sensitive, 'opportunistic' timing than in national contexts, where electoral politics matters much more. But so far, with the exception of monetary and economic policy (Dyson 2009), we know very little about how 'time consistent' EU policies are.

A second expectation concerns 'the politics of when' (Jacobs 2008), i.e. the intertemporality of policy in terms of distributing costs and benefits over time. Here, we would expect that EU policy, to the extent that it is made by non-majoritarian institutions, is more likely to time costs upfront than

majoritarian institutions, which have an incentive to defer costs well into the future. EU policy might, therefore, not just be more time consistent; it might also be better at confronting the task of distributing costs and benefits equitably over time.

Finally, a third expectation relates to the temporality of policy reforms at EU level. Impressionistic evidence suggests a strong propensity for gradualism, elaborately scheduled reform in stages, with transitional clauses, and much phasing in and phasing out. This gradualism is underpinned by the fact that planning periods in key policies – such as agricultural policy and the structural funds programme – typically exceed the five-year mandates of Commissioners and MEPs. Instead they are aligned with the budgetary cycle, which has traditionally been seven years long (Lindner 2006), so that any substantive reform requires consent across two successive Commissions, two successive parliaments and several Council presidencies.

## HOW DOES TIME MATTER? PERSPECTIVES ON THE STUDY OF POLITICAL TIME

The most critical question in the study of EU time is how the manner in which it is institutionalized shapes political action and outcomes. Scholarship that concentrates on time-related issues in political life tends to engage with one or more of three major themes, which are also amongst the central concerns of political science as a discipline: power, system performance and legitimacy.

### Power

The first theme is, not surprisingly, how political time affects the distribution of power within a political system. Studies of democratization and constitution-making, for example, have pointed to the strategic importance of the terms of chief executives (Frye 1997). Longer terms are typically associated with enhanced power and with an increased time budget seen as resource that can be employed in the political process. In the case of parliaments, a great deal has been made of timetable control as a means of governments to impose their will on the legislature (Tsebelis 2002).

The relation between time and power is also at the centre of debates surrounding EU politics and policy-making. The short term of Council presidencies is not only considered to have a negative impact on the performance of the Council, but is also often seen to create a strategic disadvantage for the Council *vis-à-vis* the EP and the Commission. Thus, the EP, with its five-year mandate and the continuity option in legislation, may use its power of delay in order to strengthen its position in inter-institutional relationships (Hix 2002). Playing with and for time has, accordingly, been identified as one of the main resources of the EP to gain influence in the legislative process (Corbett *et al.* 2007). Finally, where policy is in flux and timetables are not yet as fixed as in long-standing policy areas, political and administrative

entrepreneurs may seek to structure institutional and policy timetables in such a way as to maximize their own influence. The Commission's successful effort to become the time manager in enlargement policy provides a case in point (Avery 2009; Lass-Lennecke and Werner 2009).

## Performance

Much debate in comparative politics and comparative political economy has concerned the performance of political systems and its determinants. To give just two examples: Lijphart (1999) has argued that consensual-type democracies perform better at both the input level of representation and the output level of economic and social performance than majoritarian systems. Similarly, Persson and Tabellini (2003) have addressed the consequences of constitutional design with regard to economic outcomes, such as welfare spending and the size of budget deficits. This concern with performance, efficiency and effectiveness is echoed in time-centred research. For example, the shortening of the presidential term together with the alignment of presidential and parliamentary elections in France have largely been justified with regard to the superior performance of the new institutional set-up (Cole 2002), as it reduces the risk of *cohabitation* and the risk of gridlock in a divided executive.

In the EU setting, temporal considerations are likewise often linked to considerations of performance. For example, the troika presidency has been justified on grounds of enhanced policy-making capacity of the Council (Ágh 2007). König's (2007) work has related the length of legislative processes to the efficiency of political decision-making. Time, it is assumed here, is costly and the growing amount of time that is needed to pass bills indicates a decline in system performance. To give another example, the 'early agreements' between Council and EP under the co-decision procedures are frequently regarded as an efficiency-enhancing device. The original understanding was that technical policy proposals and minor amendments would not require three readings. Yet, research by Héri-tier and Farrell (2004; Farrell and Héri-tier 2007) shows that political constellations between Parliament and Council are more important in explaining the use of the early agreement provision (see also Rasmussen 2007b).

## Legitimacy

Finally, time-centred analysis shows an affinity to questions of legitimacy. To give two examples, in the context of her study of time rules in parliament, Riescher (1994, 1997) stresses the link between time rules, notably the rights of the opposition to demand time in committees and the plenary, and the legitimacy of the outcomes of parliamentary deliberation and decision-taking. Discussing the comparative experience of administrative reforms, Painter and Peters (forthcoming) note that one of the key reasons why radical, fast-track administrative reforms are rarely successful is the lack of time given to deliberation and the search for acceptance.

Legitimacy also has its place in trying to understand the institutionalization of political time in the EU and its consequences. One example may suffice: the establishment of longer programming cycles and the better regulation agenda more broadly have been linked to the desire to increase both the efficiency and the legitimacy of EU policy-making. Tholoniati (2009) explains how the use of regulatory impact assessments and consultation mechanisms with stakeholders increases the amount of time needed for the development of Commission proposals. But the additional time invested in policy-making should be compensated by the higher acceptance of EU policy.

## THEORIZING EU TIME

So far, we have concentrated on how and why political time matters for political analysis. We hope to have shown that analysing the institutionalization of political time in the EU more intensively and systematically than has hitherto been the case can shed new light on the overarching questions of what kind of political system the EU is, what sort of problems it might be particularly good or bad at dealing with, and how political time affects political actors and outcomes.

But how best to approach the study of political time in the EU from a theoretical point of view? There are two broad issues at stake here. First, what are the main theoretical perspectives to draw on in trying to understand the effects of political time? Second, how can we account for the manner in which political time has evolved in the EU? In line with our understanding of political time as part of the changeable institutional make-up of the EU, we think that in answering these questions our efforts should concentrate – at least in the first instance – on drawing out the implications of the dominant approaches to the study of EU institutions and their effects and to integration, institutionalization and institutional change.

EU politics has arguably been a battlefield for different theoretical approaches to the study of institutions and their effects. They have been reviewed on numerous occasions and have been extensively criticized (Schneider and Aspinwall 2001; Jupille *et al.* 2003) and we do not make any claim to originality here. In a first step, it is sufficient to distinguish rational choice (Pollack 2006) and constructivist approaches (Checkel 2006) when asking how theory might help us to formulate hypotheses about the ‘patterning’ effects of political time. Seeing political time through the lenses of these two approaches serves to highlight its different properties and possible effects.

A rationalist perspective emphasizes actors’ preferences over temporal qualities of mandates, decisional rules and policy, which are informed by the desire to maximize some material outcome, and highlights contestation and choice surrounding political time. Political time is a resource that can be used; it is instrumental and consequential. Rationalist approaches emphasize that temporal institutions act as opportunities and constraints on actors’ strategies, affecting both when and how to act.

Constructivist perspectives, on the other hand, would emphasize the social embeddedness of temporal structures. Temporal features provide meaning and sense for individuals and collectivities, they have important symbolic values, and they provide orientation about the temporal appropriateness of action. Constructivist perspectives, therefore, resonate well with the notion of 'social time' and the social construction and interpretation of time (Nowotny 1994). Constructivism suggests that actors' views of temporal orders, choices, perceptions and discourses are not necessarily guided by instrumentality, but by ideas, principles, deeply embedded values and norms.

Accordingly, rationalist approaches seem well placed to ask questions about temporal opportunity structures, time rules and strategic advantages, calculations over policy timing, time-efficient decisions, and time consistency. Constructivist approaches direct our attention to themes such as clocks and rhythms as norms and values, temporal appropriateness, 'ripe time' (Goodin 1998), the value of temporal routines, and procedural-temporal legitimacy, for instance, the allocation of time to parliamentary minorities in legislative decision-making.

Rationalist arguments resonate with perspectives of political time that concentrate on its relationship to power and performance. The timing, sequencing, and conclusion of decision-making processes are geared towards maximizing benefits and minimizing costs. For instance, König's (2007) work on the length of legislative processes reflects a concern with the costs of decision-making. The debate surrounding the 'early agreements' under the EU co-decision procedure looks at the implications for the distribution of power between EU actors. Héritier and Farrell (2004), for instance, have shown that the early agreements have shifted power towards *rapporteurs* in the EP. Time-centred analysis from a constructivist perspective, by contrast, would seem to be particularly apt to explore the linkages between political time and legitimacy. For example, Ekengren (2002) emphasizes the 'social construction' of temporality when he points to the changing perception of time at the national level in response to progressive EU integration.

The second key question about theorizing political time in the EU concerns its historical evolution as part of the overall process of European integration. There is, of course, a very rich scholarship that has sought to explain this overall trajectory, including both the different strands of 'integration theory' and more recent work that focuses on the institutionalization of, and institutional change in, the EU (Stone Sweet *et al.* 2001; Héritier 2007). These studies have not, so far, dealt more comprehensively with explaining the development of the temporal properties of the EU system *over time*. But there is no reason why they should not be able to do so. For example, Héritier's (2007) recent analysis of institutional rules and change in the EU repeatedly also touches on temporal rules of decision-making (as, for example, in legislative procedures) and it is also explicitly concerned with explaining long-term institutional change. A similar analysis that focuses head-on on temporal institutional properties and their explanation promises much in terms of a greater understanding of both the

trajectory and the interconnectedness of temporal properties. In short, we do not see the need for a 'theory of EU time', but rather encourage existing theory-oriented accounts of integration, institutionalization and institutional change to 'foreground' time as a key 'dependent' variable to be explained.

Finally, as Bulmer's (2009) contribution to this volume underlines, there is potentially also much to be learned from paying attention to how time helps to account for aspects of European integration that would otherwise be difficult to explain; in other words, it has a role to play as an 'independent' variable in explaining European integration. Historical institutionalist analyses – as exemplified by Pierson's (2004) work, in particular – with their stress on feedbacks, path dependencies, timing, sequences, and long-term processes are the most obvious point of departure. But it is interesting to note that neo-functionalism and 'neo-neofunctionalism' (Schmitter 2004) also accord initiation, priming, and transformative 'cycles' and the notion of 'asynchronic change' central explanatory status (Goetz, forthcoming).

## A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The present article has sought to make a case for studying the manner in which political time is institutionalized in the EU. Studying time in the EU involves, in particular, an analysis of terms, time budgets, time horizons and their impact on the temporal ordering of activities; of the temporal features of decision-making; and of the time choices embedded in public policies. The article has sought to show that temporal features have important consequences for questions surrounding the distribution of power, the performance and the legitimacy of the EU political system. Different theoretical approaches are relevant for the study of time in the EU and shed light on different aspects of the institutionalization of political time in the EU. The articles assembled in this volume engage with different dimensions, perspectives and approaches in the study of political time in the EU and provide selective insights into the way political time matters for the EU.

The paper by *Goetz* (2009) discusses the manner in which political time has been institutionalized in the EU. The paper advances five propositions that focus on distinctive features of the EU timescape. The propositions stress the absence of a dominant political cycle comparable to the electoral cycle at the national level and resultant problems of mobilization and synchronization; an emphasis on linear political time, associated with continuity and open-endedness, as opposed to cyclical political time, which lends itself to discontinuity in political processes; intensive inter-institutional and intra-institutional bargaining over time-setting and a propensity for governing by timetable; the fragility of EU *Eigenzeit* and its sensitivity to external interference; and the impact of EU time on political time in the member states. Goetz argues that the balances struck in the temporal constitution of the EU are critical to its long-term future.

This is followed by an article by *Tholoniati* (2009) that focuses on temporal aspects in the work of the Commission; it highlights growing differentiation

in the temporal organization of the Commission. Tholoniati notes how attempts at promoting good governance within the Commission have affected both institutional and policy time. Drawing on first-hand experience gained in the Commission, he stresses the changing clocks and time horizons within the Commission's work. In particular, he analyses the consequences of the introduction of a complex system of multi-annual planning and impact assessment and points out how they have contributed to power shifts both within the Commission and in inter-institutional relations.

Questions of timing are at the centre of the article by Kovats (2009). Kovats examines whether EU legislative activity is subject to distinct cycles comparable to national democracies. He finds that the Commission initiates more legislation at the end of the term of the EP, which contrasts with the prevalent patterns at the national level where legislative initiatives tend to peak at the beginning of the parliamentary term. Moreover, his analysis shows that the timing of the adoption of EU legislation is closely associated with the reallocation of agenda powers within the EP at mid-term rather than the timing of European elections and thus the end of MEPs' terms in office.

The three articles that follow link in different ways to polity, politics and policy concerns. The article by Avery (2009), a former long-time Commission official, underlines how the Commission sought to steer the enlargement process through governing by timetable. He discusses several examples of imaginative time-setting by the Commission, which helped to buttress its position *vis-à-vis* the Council, the EP and, above all, the candidate states.

Lass-Lennecke and Werner's article (2009) follows on from this analysis. They ask how the temporal and substantial policy challenges posed by Eastern enlargement led to institutional change inside the Commission, in particular, the creation of DG Enlargement and the establishment of new rules and procedures for time management. They thus grapple with the general question of how policy time affects institutional time. They note how policy time – aimed primarily at the accession states – fed back into the organization of the Commission's work, with DG Enlargement acting as a time-setter for much of the rest of the Commission and, to some extent, the Council.

The link between institutional and policy time is also explored in the contribution by Dyson (2009). He stresses how European economic governance has progressively become characterized by an *Eigenzeit*, with distinctive time rules and time horizons. This particular set of temporal features is typically justified with reference to the functional requirements of economic governance. But whilst performance arguments dominate, Dyson makes clear that the temporality of economic governance has also had a deep impact on political time in the member states.

The article by Bulmer (2009) focuses on the links between the study of political time, as advocated in this volume, and the concerns of historical institutionalism. Bulmer identifies overlaps and differences between the politics of time and the 'politics in time' (Pierson 2004) and examines how attention to the EU timescape can help to inform broader debates on the EU integration

process since the very beginning, the specifics and dynamics of EU policy, and the impact of EU integration on institutional change in the member states that is discussed under the heading of Europeanization.

The final article by *Meyer-Sahling and Goetz* (2009) moves the debate from broad attention to political time in the EU to the systematic study of the EU timescape. Building on the papers collected in this special issue, the paper clarifies the concept of the EU timescape and outlines its value-added for debates surrounding EU enlargement, differentiated integration and the democratization of the EU. Taking forward the insights gained from the study of the EU political system, the article concludes that political systems can be generally characterized by the systematic patterning of temporal features. The authors thus make the case for the comparative study of democratic timescapes.

**Biographical note:** Klaus H. Goetz is Professor of German and European Politics and Government at the University of Potsdam, Germany, and Visiting Fellow at the European Institute, London School of Economics, UK. Jan-Hinrik Meyer-Sahling is Lecturer in European Politics at the University of Nottingham, UK.

**Addresses for correspondence:** Klaus H. Goetz, Chair of German and European Politics and Government, Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences, University of Potsdam, August-Bebel-Strasse 89, 14482, Potsdam, Germany. email: khgoetz@uni-potsdam.de/Jan-Hinrik Meyer-Sahling, School of Politics and International Relations, University of Nottingham, University Park, NG7 2RD, UK. email: j.meyer-sahling@nottingham.ac.uk

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