

# INTEREST MOBILISATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Richard Balme, Professor of Political Science, Science Po Paris - France  
Didier Chabanet ([didierchabanet@hotmail.com](mailto:didierchabanet@hotmail.com)), MCF, European University Institute - Italy

## ABSTRACT

*In recent times the process of European integration has gone ahead to what must surely be a point of no return. As a result defence strategies and representation of interests within Europe have been considerably affected. Two related phenomena come into play here: on the one hand intensification of the lobbying directed at EU institutions, and on the other the recent and more timid increase in 'Europrotesting' (I. **Protest and Lobbying: a two-sided interest mobilisation**). A specific European system of intermediation of interests is thus emerging (II. **Actors and access point to political decision-making**). Four modes of Europeanisation of action – internalisation, externalisation, transnationalisation and supranationalisation – may be observed as having an influence on European governance (III. **Europeanisation of collective action**). The overall socio-political configuration now emerging appears fragmented and marked by persisting national styles of interest organisation and a mode of functioning that put compromise first (IV. **Composite forms of European governance**).*

## INTRODUCTION

Who does Europe benefit? For convinced Europhiles, the EU serves the interests of the majority of people, ensuring, via the creation of a common market and currency, domestic growth, increased international economic strength and the promotion of a specific model based on the affirmation of political and social rights. Its detractors take precisely the opposite point of view. The building of Europe is seen as an oligarchic, elitist process, involving the transfer and relinquishing of sovereignty in order to benefit the specific interest of minorities in hegemonic positions.

The half-century that has passed since the institutional foundation of political Europe provides a sufficiently broad basis for debate on the terms of European construction and their relation to national institutions. This, apparently, is less acceptable in certain Member States (Britain and Denmark, in particular) or among certain social groups (public support for integration increases according to educational level and decreases with age). Globally, however, integration appears – probably more so since the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty – to be an irreversible process which may be reformed or reoriented but certainly not undone. Consequently, political and social behaviours, instead of

being deployed for or against integration, tend rather to use it to their advantage.

## 1 PROTEST AND LOBBYING: A TWO-SIDED INTEREST MOBILISATION

The EU provides a framework for protest in the public sphere. The demonstrations by farmers since the 1960s are the most obvious example. They have recently been added to by the emergence of 'Eurostrikes' in the industrial sector, the most remarkable being the 1997 Vilvorde protest against the closure of the Renault plant in Belgium [8]. It had been preceded by transnational trades union mobilisations. These collective actions now seem increasingly frequent, and constitute attempts to benefit from the opportunities proposed by the European institutions. It would seem, then, that collective protest has seized upon integration due to the transnationalisation of economic relations, with a view to obtaining intervention by European institutions or to contesting their decisions.

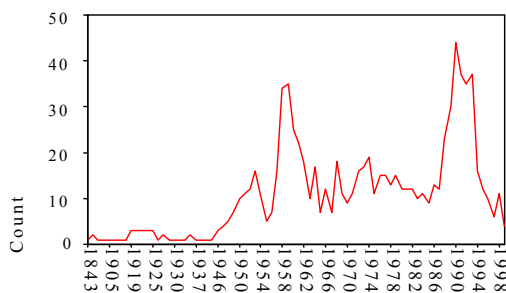
On a more confidential level, the Europe of interests is also the 'Europe of Corridors', that is to say of lobbying. Undoubtedly, European institutions, in particular the Commission, are largely open to dialogue and consultation with organised groups. Furthermore, integration has long necessitated the deployment of a system of interest representation and, more recently, of a lobbying market – professional and marketed forms of mediation, in other words. The Commission estimated in 1992 that 3,000 specialised interest groups were present in Brussels and that the lobbying sector employed around 10,000 people. Eurogroups, or associations specifically organised at European level, were estimated at around 500 in 1985, 700 in 1996, and 889 in 2000 [1].

This continuing growth is revelatory of three complementary tendencies. On the one hand, it indicates that interaction with the European institutions constitutes a stake for a constantly growing number of actors with increasingly diverse interests. On the other hand, it shows that interest groups are closely associated with the public policy mechanisms of the EU and this profoundly influences the structuring of the European political system. Finally, it suggests that integration, understood here as the development of communitarian prerogatives, leads not only to mobilisation, but also to renewed, specifically European, forms of interest organisation.

### 1.1 The increase in the number of interest groups

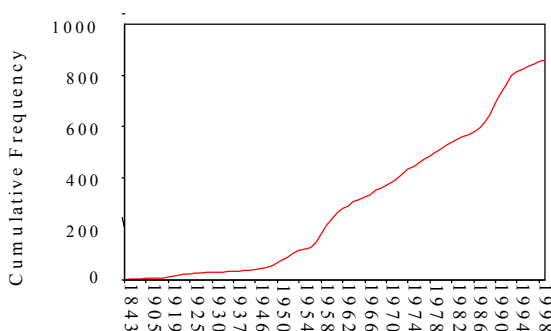
This tendency is attested to by a database that we have constructed based on index of the Commission [15]. Interest mobilisation in the EU is as old as the community's institutions. The creation of half of the Eurogroups in existence dates to before 1974 (figure 1).

**Date of creation of Eurogroups (annual strengths)**



The period following the Maastricht Treaty is marked by a new settling down, interest mobilisation thus once again finding its pre-*e*-Single Act rhythm. The curve shows two peaks coinciding with the Treaty of Rome and the Single Act. The investment of interests increases during phases when European responsibilities are being significantly expanded and when the combination of public decision-making and interests-related activity is more marked. The slowing down in the speed of creation during the final phase probably testifies both to the maturity gained by the interests system and to the institutional stagnation of integration, at least in terms of policies relevant to organised interests groups (figure 2).

**Date of creation of Eurogroups (total strengths)**



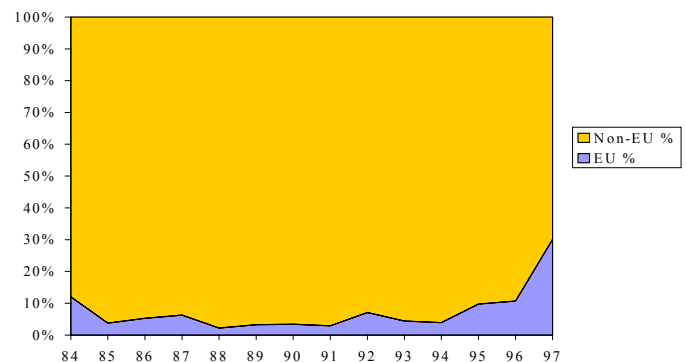
### 1.2 Towards a development of protest behaviours ?

Interpretations vary widely in this regard. D. Rucht refutes this hypothesis, using a quantitative methodology to analyse the German case between 1950 and 1994 [11]. The results concern transnational demonstrations as much as national protests linked to European issues, and count

equally if we consider the social conflicts generally or, more specifically, the field of the environment, *a priori* more open to transnationalisation. Other, more comparative research shows diverging results, in particular that of U. Reising [10] who sees a moderate increase in Euro-protests in France and Germany between 1980 and 1995, but a decline in Belgium. D. Imig and S. Tarrow present the results of a quantitative study of Euro-protests [6]. They argue that between 1984 and 1997, 82% of protests against the EU were organised by professional groups. Within this category, farmers represent half of the demonstrations considered, with this proportion on the rise. Nonetheless minority non-professional interests saw their proportion double to 21% between 1993 and 1997. It may be deduced from this that interests that see themselves as being encroached upon by EU policy and thus are led to protest are mainly socio-professional groups affected by the economic dimension of integration and its legal mechanisms. However, the increase in non-professional protest indicates a politicisation at European level on less marked socio-economic bases.

The two authors establish, on the one hand a significant preponderance, among protests in general, of exclusively national considerations and, on the other hand, their relative and limited growth over the recent period (1994-1997). As the following table indicates, the proportion of conflicts generated by European decisions is following an upwards curve: in 1992 such conflicts accounted for less than 5% of the total for Europe, rising towards the end of the decade to over 10% (figure 3\*).

**Annual percentage of European protests generated by EU policies and institutions (1984-97)**



The conclusions of these research thus call for prudence. They do indicate, however, that large-scale mobilisation by Brussels-based interest groups, as well as the Europeanisation of public policy in the Member States such mobilisation testifies to, is not accompanied

\* We warmly thank the two authors for authorising the reproduction of their table.

by an equivalent tendency in terms of protest-based action.

D. Imig and S. Tarrow stress the macro-structural and cultural conditions do not adequately explain collective action and point up that convergence between social networks, collective identities and political opportunities must take place for such action to emerge. For his part, D. Rucht sees four types of constraints as limiting the Europeanisation of protest: The preponderant role of States and national governments in the European political process; the complexity of European institutions and decision-making; the difficulties of organisation and coordination between heavily divided social actors; and the unstructured character of the European public opinion such mobilisation appeals to.

Despite their infrequency, these political events may have considerable repercussions. They can also take on variable and, at first sight, confused configurations. D. Imig and S. Tarrow throw light on this complexity by distinguishing two aspects of transnational protests: international cooperation associating individuals from different countries in a coordinated campaign against a common adversary and international conflict between actors from different countries. They conclude with an examination of collective European protests specifically aimed at EU institutions and policies.

## 2 ACTORS AND ACCESS POINT TO POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING

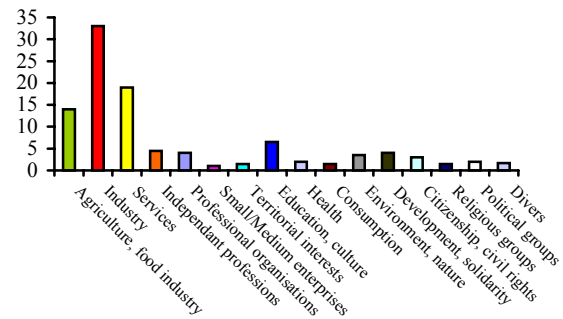
Confronted with an issue, groups logically tend to search for an access point allowing them to orient it towards the promotion or protection of their interests.

### 2.1 Who lobbies?

Most Eurogroups (67%) are made up of economic interests. This group heavily outnumbers a composite of public interests (23.4%). A small third group (9.6%) comprises the independent professions, the employers' associations and professional inter-sectoral bodies, the organisations of small and medium enterprises and the employee unions (figure 4).

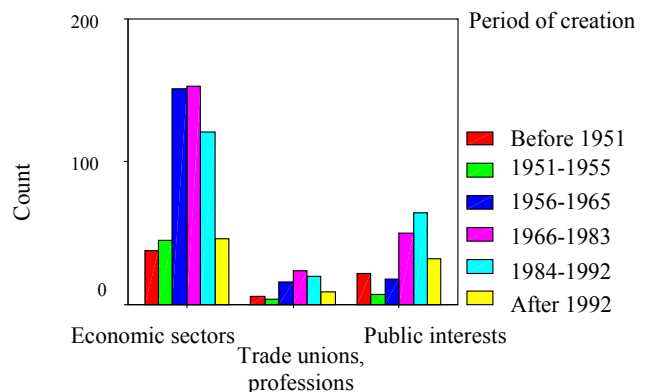
Economic interests have a massive impact in Brussels, eclipsing social interests or those of a more political orientation. However, the representation of public interests, as minoritarian as it may be, remains significant, accounting for almost a quarter of all interest groups. A chronological analysis also reveals significant trends. In fact, the creation of economic groups is more recent than that of unions, professional organisations and, even more so, public interests groups. Figure 5 clearly illustrates the contrasting phases of mobilisation of different interests. While economic sectors mobilised most during the period of the Common Market and 'Euro-paralysis' (1966-1983),

Repartition of Eurogroups by sector (%)



it was during the establishment of the Single Market (1984-1992) that group commitment to the public interests loomed largest on the European scene. The most recent period has seen the gap between the creation of the two group types close considerably; the investment of public interest thus testifies, over and above the mainly economic character of integration, to the political intensification of the EU (figure 5).

Creation of Eurogroups (strengths)



### 2.2 Avenues to influence

Unsurprisingly then, the **European Commission** is the focus of the interests system. The Commission plays a crucial role in the elaboration of EU policies, be it the preparatory phases of major political changes or their technical implementation once they have been adopted. Moreover, the Commission has long encouraged dialogue and consultation in various forms. Amid all the complexities of European decision-making, the Commission has the most central role because it intervenes most at the outset of a process and remains present throughout the different phases. Thus it is crucial for each interest group to identify its relevant interlocutors and to maintain sufficiently good relations with them.

The **Council of Ministers** is also an important point of access. It is endowed with considerable influence, given that as part of the intergovernmental process it has the initiative in the political issues being debated and also because the great majority of decisions require its approval. Interest groups are less formally associated with its working groups than with those of the Commission. They nevertheless make their voices heard by lobbying national functionaries who are members of the working groups, the national delegations at the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER) who prepare the Council decisions, and national administrations. With the advent of qualified majority voting, this national path to European influence has become less effective, as it reduces the likelihood of veto by a Member State. Moreover, the Council has precedence in respect of the more political questions. From another point of view, it has gained in influence in this regard for political rather than institutional reasons. The Council seems today to be more involved than the Commission in the definition of political stakes.

Long criticised for its institutional weakness, the **European Parliament** witnessed a widening of its prerogatives under the Single Act of 1986 and the treaties of Maastricht in 1992 and Amsterdam in 1997. The extension of its responsibilities mainly concerns the Commission's power of censure, and the development of the codecision procedure in the legislative process. Certain protest movements in the public sphere often enjoy better access to the European political process than to that of the Member States. The two-pronged effect of the makeup of the European parliament is relevant here: it is younger, includes more women, the proportion of people from minority groups is higher than at national level and political innovation is vital for a parliament operating within a relatively saturated institutional environment.

The **European Court of Justice** also offers an access point to influence [4]. It is an important characteristic of the European political system that individuals may contest the conformity of a decision through legal channels. The Court has notably been targeted by feminist groups, environmental organisations, unions, but also employers, often in order to better promote their causes.

### ***2.3 Which institutions are the focus of protest-mobilisations?***

Firstly, agricultural mobilisation, representing a significant proportion of all protest, often coincides with meetings of the Council of Ministers, the aim being reform of the common agricultural policy. This is explained by the Council's role in the field in which the rule of unanimity prevails. It is also targeted when the influence exerted by the Commission on the COREPER

or on national administrations has produced effects leaving several interests unsatisfied. Another characteristic element is the development of the practice of holding 'counter-summits' during the meetings of the European Council that gather together the heads of State and government in towns selected by the EU presidency. The practice was systemised by the demonstrations against unemployment and social exclusion [3]. Each European summit is also the occasion for a more or less important transnational mobilisation, aimed protesting against the liberalism of European integration and the free market; an example took place during the WTO summit in Seattle in December 1999.

Thus it can be seen that the Commission does not hold the same crucial position here as it does for the action of interest groups. Protests take place at the most political moments of the decision-making process, either for initiating policies when the European Council is the main target, or for opposing their implementation, when (as in the case of agriculture) the Council of Ministers is challenged. Protest targeting of European institutions is relatively diffuse and it is rather the ensemble of national governments and different EU authorities that are called upon to intervene. Lastly it should be pointed out that, in this case, protests are transplanted into pre-existing agendas that they then attempt to orient. They somehow try to make a niche for themselves in the European decision-making process, benefiting from the media publicity surrounding its most political moments.

## **3 EUROPEANISATION OF COLLECTIVE ACTION**

'Europeanisation' may be defined as a totality of changes affecting social and political interactions at three levels: *territorial*, due to the enlargement of their framework and perimeters; *relational*, due to the transformation of actors and their relations to power and domination; and finally, *cognitive*, due to the definition of new values, ideas or novel justifications of the social order and its developments (such as peace in Europe, market efficiency, Human Rights, constitutional democracy, international power based on currency, the 'European social model' etc.). It is the State's capacity for political integration that is put to the test by each of these processes of change, processes that affect territoriality, the distributive mechanism necessary for social cohesion and the collective representation of a destiny and historical project underpinning the political community [2].

### ***3.1 Four modes of Europeanisation***

Europeanisation may firstly be realised by means of *internalisation*, that is to say the development of mobilisations that are essentially local or national in

terms of their actors, the systems used and the targets aimed at, but relating to European issues, most often in reaction to decisions made by the EU.

A second process involves *externalisation*. Whereas in the instance mobilisation is structured by the importation of European norms, reliance in this case is on political opportunities provided by European institutions, primarily in the domains of recourse to legal action, regulation policy or distributive community policy. Local or national actors thus activate a system of European action, generally following the pluralist mode of lobbying, in order to bypass national obstacles or to take advantage of complementary resources and better their situation.

The *transnationalisation* of collective action relies, in contrast, on a transformation of the actors themselves and the crossing of national boundaries to include two or more countries. The targets of such mobilisation are essentially European and their commonest technique is lobbying – making use of the pluralist system. Mobilisation may also take the form of overt protest, as marches by the unemployed, farmers' demonstrations and even the Vilvorde strike have sometimes done.

Finally, the most integrated form of collective action in the sense defined here is that of *supranationalisation*. This fits with marked institutionalisation of actors at the European level and, in practical terms, their formal coopting into the EU decision-making process. The consultation of interests with regard to the methods of sectoral corporatism is highly developed without excluding pluralist forms of influence.

### **3.2 *Oppositions, reinforcement and complementarity between these categories***

There exists a dichotomy between the first two (internalisation and externalisation) and the last two (transnationalisation and supranationalisation). This means fundamental disagreement generated by the continuing presence of national actors and local stakes and the emergence of transnational solidarities and specifically European regulations. The result here may be a resistance by national interest intermediation systems, that can be attributed to the coexistence of the two first modes of Europeanisation and the latter two. By giving rise to multi-levelled mobilisations, the European and national interest intermediation systems are not exclusive, but rather, complementary.

It should also be pointed out that these different modes mutually reinforce each other. The mobilisation of national or local interests at European level in effect generates forms of actor transnationalisation and, ultimately, their supranationalisation via institutionalisation [13]. In return, the continuing development of a European level of normative production reinforces the probability of reactive mobilisation, or in

other words, of the Europeanisation of collective action by means of internalisation.

Chronologically, externalisation precedes internalisation, as indicated by the difference in mobilisation between interest groups and social movements. However, the European system is now entering a new phase in which the major part of the externalisation process has been achieved – at least in terms of the contemporary institutional design - and where it is rather the development of conflict which takes over. Given the constraints on collective mobilisation, it is more likely to find expression via internalisation. Thus we need to estimate to what extent internal mobilisations may be capable of generating new types of political coalition [7].

On the more directly European level, there seems to be a tension between the modes of transnationalisation and supranationalisation of collective action. Corporatism appears to have been an effective means of constructing public policy in the European arena, but now seems to have been overtaken by two complementary tendencies. At the intra-European level, mobilised interests often generate an opening or a challenge to the communities of public policies in place. On the external level, the beginning of the 1990s saw a stepping-up in international trade negotiations that also transformed the European agenda and subjected it to much more liberal pressures than in the preceding period. Corporatist regulation thus lost ground in terms both of legitimacy and efficiency.

## **4 COMPOSITE FORMS OF EUROPEAN GOVERNANCE**

By 'governance', we mean the relations between a group of institutions and public and private stakeholders, rather than the activity of a centralising body of executive authority. In this sense the concept is most appropriate for the EU [5, 9, 12]. Although the Commission, now politically accountable to the Parliament, appears to resemble a European government, its executive authority remains limited by the responsibilities assigned to it by the treaties, by its appointment procedures and, more generally, by the absence of a European State. In contrast, public action and legitimacy in the Member States are increasingly dependent on European decisions. Governance in Europe is thus more and more affected by integration.

### **4.1 *National styles and the European style***

Three main characteristics of the EU are also clear: a marked degree of institutional pluralism, both horizontal (between EU institutions) and vertical (between the EU and the Member States); fragmentation of sectorally defined political arenas; the weakness of political representation (the prerogatives of the European and

national parliaments, apathy towards European elections, an uncertain European public sphere) and the resultant problems of legitimation.

Institutional pluralism leads to a relative flowering of national interest systems, with growing transnational interdependencies and new types of coalitions and action. However, although Europe sometimes appears to represent a second chance for interests tried out in the national arena, it is also a factor in the steadily increasing cost of accessing influence: it accentuates the gap between large and small, the strong and the weak. This institutional pluralism also increasingly fits with the political style of furthering one's interests within liberal political regimes, as opposed to that of systems under which the State exerts some form of control over their expression and representation.

In a large number of areas (agriculture, social policy, regional policy, the environment), governance takes advanced corporatist forms. In others, it remains pluralist (competition and internal markets, women's rights, Human Rights and the protection of minorities) and sometimes takes a statist form (the single currency) [5]. It may be that these differences reflect national influences prioritising certain sectors. The partial importation and hybridisation of different styles of national public policy-making are thus linked to the specificity of the sector-based organisation of interests in the definition of governance modes that remain essentially composite. The weight of historical constraint is significant in this context and is not about to wane. National systems of interest intermediation, however, see their specificity decreasing as a function of the Members States' integration of shared norms.

#### 4.2 Liberal European corporatism

European governance seems very fragmented across compartmentalised arenas. This across the board, sector-based structure is the result of the European decision-making process, itself constituted by the gradual accumulation of responsibilities and policies that are seldom related to each other in a context of atrophied political representation. It should also be emphasised that, in the majority of sectors, the natural inclination of interest organisation is towards a sectoral corporatism, or the formal co-option of organised groups and their association with public policy-making. On the whole, the trend is towards a relative opening-up of public policy networks and differentiation both of the actors involved and the means of accessing influence. But the main novelty of European governance probably resides in the combination of a high degree of institutional association between public and private interests, with a very liberal orientation of public policies.

In fifty years, the Europe's international economic position has been radically transformed. Since the end of

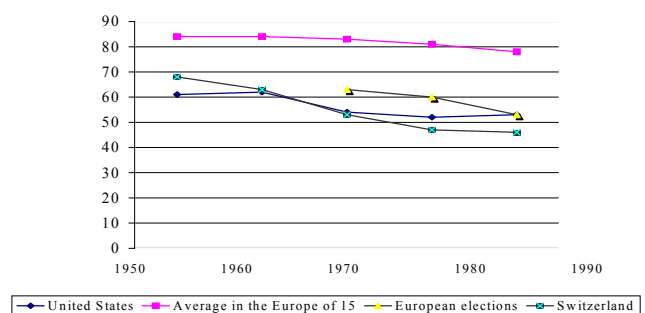
the 'good old days', it has eliminated most of its tendencies towards inflation and financial instability. No doubt, the Common Market and the single currency have contributed to these developments. The European interests system and its sector-related corporatist organisation have thus been a factor in establishing a mode of regulation in which growth emerges from monetarist politics and the transformation of the conditions of delegation, notably in the production field. This has been largely achieved by the building of a large internal market, while a high level of unemployment leading to restrictive budgetary policies has deepened social inequalities and created situations of impoverishment and exclusion.

#### 4.3 Conflictuality and legitimacy in Europe

The overall results raise major questions regarding the forms and degree of legitimacy of European integration. Firstly, there are the issues arising from the 'democratic deficit', or the limited nature of European protest. Low or in decline, voter turnout in European elections is often cited as illustrating this notorious deficit. At the same time these turnout levels are comparable to those of the large federal democracies, such as the United States or Switzerland and in some cases are even higher. European citizens are as diligent at European level as American or Swiss voters are nationally (figure 6).

##### Voter turnout in Western democracies

(% of voters. Ten year average)



Given the two-pronged effect of citizen indifference and constraints of collective action, Europe to date remains relatively unaffected by protest and thus, somehow, legitimate by default. The 'post-parliamentary' character of the European institutional structure is clear. Its parliamentarisation is a rather belated development and is little more than a means of legitimation that adds to the dominant procedural and normative methods. Parliamentary representation is not the outcome of civil society calls for access to control of a pre-existing State. On the contrary, it is constitutive of a political authority developing within a still highly divided social context. At the same time, the weaknesses of party democracy are much more pronounced here than at the national level.

In return, the investment and legitimacy of interest groups are highly significant in the European arena. The pointing-up of the development of corporatist forms and of the atrophy of protest-based mobilisation at European level is a reaction to one of the major benefits claimed by neo-corporatist theory, namely that such institutional arrangements favour governability by reducing social conflict [14]. Seen in this perspective, Europe have defused potential interest opposition groups by including them, albeit in a controlled sense, in the decision-making system. The recent trend towards increased association of pluralism with a certain Europeanisation of protest also supports such an interpretation.

The general extension of EU responsibilities and the reinforcement of the Parliament gradually bringing a more explicitly political tone to the various mobilisations. However, the marked integration of certain interests at European level most often coincides with constraints on negatively affected groups in the national arena. From this point of view, it is principally the national governments that are ultimately exposed to an European legitimacy deficit, in that they are the ones who generally remain the targets of protest. The main political tensions and potential conflicts are those within the Member States rather than in Brussels. Thus, the future of integration must largely depend on conspicuousness of the divisions that emerge and on the dexterity brought to bear on incorporating them into a European political system.

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