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Democratic Stress and Political Institutions: Drives of Reforms of Bicameralism in Times of Crisis

Michelangelo Vercesi 

Center for the Study of Democracy, Leuphana University of Lüneburg, Lüneburg, Germany

ABSTRACT

Traditional patterns of political participation and party representation in Europe have been put to the test by the so-called crisis of representative democracy: mainstream parties have been perceived as more unfit to govern; the level of electoral participation has decreased; and voters have shown increasing dissatisfaction with representative institutions. In several cases, these changes have pushed governing elites to (seek to) redefine the 'rules' of the political process, in response to the challenges posed by new party contesters. In particular, in different European countries political actors have stressed the need to undermine the role of second chambers as veto players. This article focuses on both successful and failed attempts of reforms of bicameralism between 2006 and 2016 in seven EU countries (Belgium; Germany; Ireland; Italy; Romania; Spain; UK). It tries (1) to understand if political elites in Europe have pursued parliamentary reforms as a reaction to 'democratic stress' and (2) to single out the circumstances of success and failures. A discussion of the detectable trends of institutional reforms during democratic crises and some tentative explanations are finally provided.

KEYWORDS

Second parliamentary chambers; party democracy; constitutional reform

1. Introduction

This article deals with reform processes of bicameral parliaments in times of democratic crisis. It aims to highlight the main conditions for institutional reforms, involved actors and their motivations, and tries to generate new conjectures about the variation of empirical outcomes in Europe in recent times.

Representative democracy has been experiencing a 'stress', at least in the form it has developed after the Second World War. This phenomenon has been especially pronounced in the European Union, where the growing importance of supranational institutions has eroded powers and room for manoeuvre of member States as sovereign actors. On the one hand, mainstream parties have lost support in favour of new challengers. On the other hand, people's dissatisfaction with representative institutions has increased (Mair, 2013; Plescia & Eberl, 2019). These phenomena have translated into both higher electoral volatility and lower turnout rates.¹ Voters have become more critical towards governing elites and have demanded new forms of participation (e.g. Hutter, Kriesi, & Vidal, 2018, p. 12).

This article starts from the assumption that ‘there is a link between the erosion of political support and the reforms of the democratic institutions’ (Bedock, 2017, p. 9). In particular, it seeks to connect ‘democratic stress’ to the notion of ‘institutional stress’, focussing on parliamentary second chambers. Since the 2000s, several attempts to reform bicameralism in Europe have been made, contesting the institutional *status quo*. An up-to-date and systematic investigation of these reforms is lacking in the literature (Russell & Sandford, 2002). This is surprising in light of the vibrant political debate on the current functionality of upper chambers.² Second chambers may prove to be strong institutional veto points and sources of policy stalemates (Binder, 2003; Muthoo & Shepsle, 2008). Scholars have stressed both their potential benefits for institutional balance (Norton, 2007; Rogers, 2001) and their negative effects on policy performance ‘in the course of the globalization process’ (Vatter, 2005, p. 195); on government budget deficits (Heller, 1997); and as functionally redundant institutions (Cutrone & McCarty, 2006). In spite of many criticisms, second chambers have proved to be very resistant to changes (Russell & Sandford, 2002, pp. 87–88), thus raising a puzzle about the discrepancy between theoretical premises and empirical patterns.

I seek to answer three main questions: ‘did European political elites advocate (or oppose) reforms of second chambers in reaction to “democratic stress”?; ‘in which direction did reforms’ supporters encourage institutional change?; ‘under what circumstances were these attempts (not) successful?’. The article is structured as follows. First, it presents the main concepts and theoretical background, linking ‘democratic crisis’ and institutional reform. Secondly, it operationalises the dimensions of analysis and provides a justification for case selection. The subsequent part deals with the empirical investigation, based on an in-depth comparison of eight reform processes. Finally, the article discusses the findings and proposes outlooks for future research.

2. Accounting for Reforms: Conditions, Strategies, and Propositions

The main premise of this article is that democratic stress is conducive to what we can name *institutional stress*. I define institutional stress as a mismatch between a given (political) institution’s features/functions and the preferences/expectations of political actors in the political system. This relative gap can be placed at the elite level or at the mass level and it can be affected by both structural and contingent factors. In democracies, political institutions are expected to be enough adaptable to societal changes (Huntington, 1968) and to create equilibrium between masses and elites’ preferences (e.g. Acemoğlu & Robinson, 2008). The more political actors consider an institution dysfunctional, the more the institution will be ‘stressed’.

In her extensive work on institutional reforms in Western Europe, Bedock (2017) suggests that the determinants of reforms are the result of interplay between exogenous and endogenous factors. Based on the previous literature on institutional change, the author classifies political crisis and citizen dissatisfaction as *conditions* for reform proposals. In particular, the attention is on shifts in political competition (e.g. increasing electoral competition) and party system changes.³

Favourable exogenous circumstances do not always lead to institutional change in the expected direction. They do it only when other endogenous factors make their causal potential spring (e.g. Kofß, 2018). An example of endogenous factor is the change of

preferences of traditional elites, consequent to the emergence of political challengers. In this regard, Shugart (2003) concludes that reforms are put on the agenda only when governing parties recognise that, given modified conditions, they have an interest in changing institutions. Based on this, I argue that reforms are proposed when a specific interaction between ‘structural’ and ‘contingent’ conditions occurs: this combination is the *trigger* for institutional reform. The causal logic behind this explanation is configurational, rather than correlational (Ragin, 2008): we have conditions that, *per se*, would not account for changes; on the contrary, it is their conjunction that leads to the (proposal) of reforms. This means also that causation is asymmetrical, since the same conditions could be conducive to different outcomes. Exogenous factors are necessary, but insufficient conditions, which can interact with a variety of endogenous factors and agents’ responses.

Renwick (2010) distinguishes between ‘elite-majority imposed’ reforms and ‘elite-mass’ interactive sources of change. According to Jacobs (2011), governing elites advocate major reforms only when they are the initiators. In contrast, elites would defend their positions in the system when pressures to reform come from masses. The process of reform that develops is not deterministic; political actors have to manage a series of barriers and opportunities along the path (Bedock, 2017, p. 46). For example, the presence of more veto players can undermine the likelihood of change (Tsebelis, 2002). The success of a reform can be affected also by shifts in the power balance between ‘reformers’ and ‘conservatives’ along the process and their strategic responses (e.g. Mahoney & Thelen, 2010).⁴

With regard to agents’ motivations, Pilet (2008) suggests that political actors do not behave only as self-maximizers of the own preferences, but they can also – rationally – pursue risk-avoidance (assuming they want to maintain or enhance their influence in the system). Similarly, Ware (2002) claims that elites can pursue institutional reforms to avoid broader changes, which can jeopardise their status in the system. Bedock (2017, p. 53) shows ‘that cooperation accounts for the outcome [...] as much as political competition, especially when [...] proposals] contain consensual reforms’. Political interactions are even more important than institutional constraints in explaining institutional democratic reforms:

the main logic behind reforms of the core democratic rules is *political*. [...] Political elites react to changes to their electoral environment. The short-term [...] factors (rise of volatility and alternation) provide a decisive push, by fostering a favourable context and decisive opportunities to adopt reforms. (Bedock, 2017, pp. 111–112, emphasis added)

This prompts us to observe the processes of reform in detail.

For the reasons mentioned in the introduction, second chambers are an interesting focus to assess the validity of these theoretical arguments, especially in light of the fact that several reforms were proposed after the fully-fledged breakthrough of the ‘erosion of political support’ in Western democracies in the 2000s (Dalton, 2004). In this regard, reforms of second chambers can either disperse or concentrate power. In Europe, a common trait has been the inclination of elites to facilitate governmental decision-making to the detriment of power balance, suggesting a nexus between the need to have a faster policy-making and the choice of upper houses as reform targets (Bedock, 2017, p. 70). Because of their status as veto points, upper houses can be major targets for those elites who pursue change as a reaction to modified environmental conditions. My first proposition is that (1) *in times of ‘crises’, political elites try to weaken second*

chambers, framed as inefficient institutions. Moreover, if we posit that reforms can be conceived of as strategic responses of political actors – who are risk-averse – to the challenges posed to their position in the system, the second proposition is that (2a) *governing elites can advocate institutional reforms to try to preserve their power and (2b) they try to preserve their power vis-à-vis new contesters.* At the same time, (3) *challengers can advocate reforms, if they deem the (potential) outcome as beneficial for their position in the system vis-à-vis governing elites.* Finally, we know that consensual reforms and inclusive reform processes are more likely to be conducive to successful outcomes (Bedock, 2017, p. 250). However, the loss of legitimacy of traditional parties, the misalignment between elites and voters, and the demands for new forms of participation have resulted in the decline of mainstream parties' electoral support, in increasing party fragmentation, and lower levels of citizens' support for party decisions. My fourth proposition is thus that (4) *democratic stress pushes elites to pursue reforms.*⁵ *However, the phenomena that define this stress also make reforms harder to accomplish.* This happens because the democratic stress creates conditions, which are unfavourable to broad consensus and supermajorities.

3. Operationalisation, Case Selection, and Method

Second chambers fulfil three main functions: representation, law-making, and governmental control. Comparative scholarship tells that the extent to which these functions are fulfilled effectively depends on the strength of second chambers (e.g. Lijphart, 2012). Strength is a multidimensional concept and three dimensions are particularly important to study the reforms of second chambers: formal powers, compositional incongruence, and legitimacy (e.g. Lijphart, 2012; Russell, 2013a; Vercesi, 2017). These three aspects cover the main features of upper houses. Reforms can be understood as attempts to modify chamber's position on one or more of these dimensions; several indicators can be used to assess the direction and scope of reforms.

First, reformers can try to modify the formal powers of the chamber. On the one hand, these powers can be especially undermined if the two parliamentary branches are equal and reforms want to diminish veto points in the system. On the other hand, reformers can aim to increase these powers, if they are in a subordinated position in the system and want to use the upper house as an institutional access to power and/or a device to contrast the competitors, who are favoured in the first chamber. In parliamentary systems, the main formal powers are the power to issue no-confidence motions and the final veto on legislation, either as binding amendment or unlimited delay. Veto power can refer to constitutional issues, budgetary measures, and ordinary legislation. The second dimension of strength is the degree of compositional incongruence between the two chambers. Common proxies are the different timing of selection, different methods of (s)election, and different representative principles between the branches (Lijphart, 2012; Tsebelis & Money, 1997). Finally, legitimacy can rest upon the representation of the (majority) of the electorate as a whole or the representation of specific interests within the society, for example of territories, minorities, vocations, and expertise (Vercesi, 2017).

The literature provides indexes to measure the strength of second chambers on each of these dimensions (Vercesi, 2017). Empirical findings show that European second chambers are similar in terms of formal powers and that the lack of democratic legitimisation is usually counterbalanced by other forms of representation. Moreover, formal powers

correlate positively with both compositional homogeneity and higher legitimation. The major source of strength for second chambers is often their role as chambers that represent specific sectors of the society.

By using this scheme, we can systematically define the characteristics of second chambers before the attempt of reform and the direction and the outcome of the same reforms. For case selection, I follow a ‘most similar systems design’ (Przeworski & Teune, 1970). In line with our configurational assumptions about causality, cases are selected on the outcome of interest. I select those European cases where an attempt to reform the second chamber along one or more of the dimensions of analysis were made and try to observe whether or not the theoretical link between actors’ reaction to democratic challenges and reform applies. The limitation to Europe allows dealing with a more socio-economically and politically homogenous area. We have argued that the 2000s are the years in which the ‘democratic stress’ mostly develops (e.g. Chiamonte & Emanuele, 2017; Conti, Hutter, & Nanou, 2018). For this reason, I use 2000 as the starting watershed to select the case studies. I then focus on those countries with a bicameral parliament where we can find a proposal of reform, whose scope can be defined substantial according to the criteria of Bedock (2017). The final selection is based on the 18 countries covered by Bedock’s analysis (Bedock, 2017, Appendix 1). Overall, we find eight attempts of reform in seven countries, from 2006 to 2016 (year of the final decision). Figure 1 presents second chamber’s characteristics in each country by dimension of analysis. Strength is calculated based on the aforementioned indices and increases from 0 to 1.

The second chambers at issue have (potentially) a medium/high impact on the political process. The German Federal Council (*Bundesrat*) and the Italian Senate (*Senato*) are the outstanding cases. In Germany, the upper house is endowed with limited formal powers, contrary to the Italian case. However, the *Bundesrat* derives its strength especially from compositional incongruence and legitimacy (see Vercesi, 2017). Romania is almost

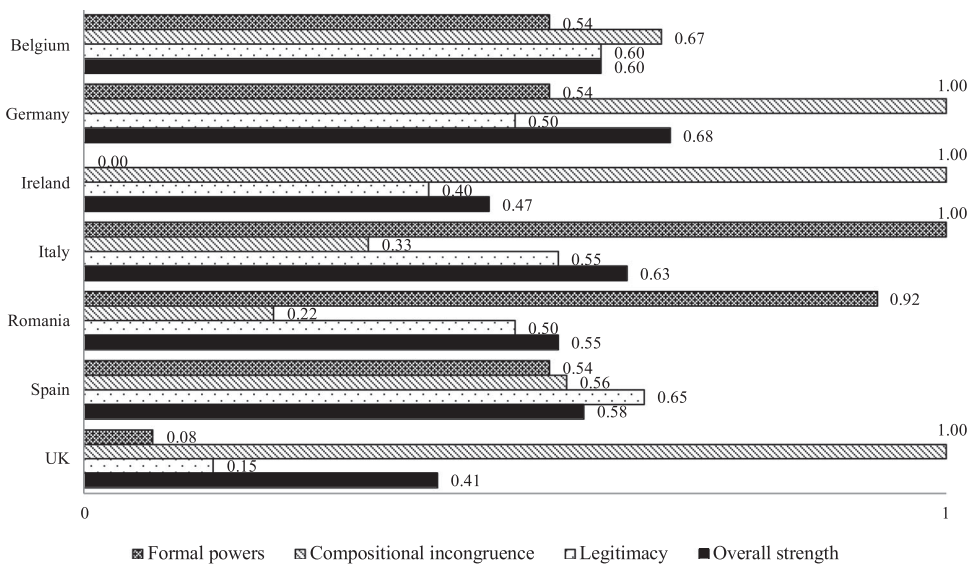


Figure 1. Second chambers’ characteristics in seven European countries by dimension, 2016. Note: the overall strength is the mean of the scores on each dimension. Source: Vercesi (2017, p. 617, 623), own update.

equal to Italy with regard to formal powers. Spain is the only case with a high level of legitimacy. Here, territorial representation coexists with both directly and indirectly elected members. Finally, the two Westminster systems – Ireland and the United Kingdom – show low levels of both formal powers and legitimacy, with very high levels of compositional incongruence.

Table 1 shows the direction of the reforms and their outcomes.

Overall, out of eight attempts to reform (or to abolish) second chambers, only two were successful. It is worth noting that in all but two cases (Spain and the UK) reformers wanted to undermine the formal powers of chambers, while, in some cases, they tried to differentiate the house from its parliamentary sibling and to increase its legitimacy in the system. These trends are in line with our argument about ‘democracy under stress’: reformers try to create a more efficient political environment, while they positively redefine the representative and inclusive capacity of institutions.

In the following section, I provide in-depth analyses of both successful and failed processes against the provided theoretical background. I connect the main assumptions about the role of different political actors to the intended goals of the reforms, by referring to our three dimensions of analysis. The investigation is explorative rather than theory-testing oriented. As suggested by the literature on comparative methods, I use case studies to generate new conjectures, given the paucity of systematic theoretical knowledge on our specific topic (Seha & Müller-Rommel, 2016, p. 423).

4. A Comparison of Eight Reform Processes in Europe

The empirical analysis compares groups of countries, based on the outcomes of the reform processes. Building on the theoretical framework, I highlight who supported the reform and who opposed it, their main arguments to justify their actions, and the specific aspects to reform. Three main ‘challenges’ are taken in consideration, as signals of the ‘democratic stress’: conflict between mainstream parties and new challengers or inter-institutional conflict; political parties’ loss of support in the society; public dissatisfaction with established representative procedures and institutions. The first signal is operationalised as both the level of support for the two largest parties and the fragmentation of the party system in terms of votes. Inter-institutional conflict coincides with ‘divided government’, while the overall level of support for political parties is operationalised as the level

Table 1. Reforms, reform directions, and outcomes by country.

Case	Reform	Reform direction*			Outcome**
		Powers	Incongruence	Legitimacy	
Belgium	Change of selection method	–	+	–	Y (2011)
Germany	Powers reduction	–	No change	No change	Y (2006)
Ireland	Abolition		--		N (2013)
Italy/1	Powers reduction/representative change	–	+	+	N (2006)
Italy/2	Powers reduction/representative change	–	+	–	N (2016)
Romania	Abolition		–		N (2009)
Spain	Change of selection method	No change	+	+	N (2006)
UK	Representative change	No change	+	+	N (2012)

*– means a decrease of strength on the dimension, + an increase and -- a full cancellation.

**Y indicates the success of the reform and N the failure. Between brackets, there is the year of the final decision.

Source: see Figure 1, own elaboration.

of electoral turnout. Finally, I use data about the level of trust in national institutions to assess the institutional dissatisfaction of citizens (Table 2).

Indicators in the table refer to exogenous factors and measure the level of ‘democratic stress’ in the political system. The first two indicators (two-party index and effective number of parties) are to be read jointly. Higher fragmentation together with lower support for the two larger parties can be considered as a proxy of an overall lower support for traditional elites and the emergence of new parties and contesters. In this regard, the table shows that only in the Spanish case the two largest parties could get more than 66% of votes together; especially in Belgium and Italy, party system fragmentation was associated to relatively low support for mainstream parties. A ‘divided government’ indicates instead that potential veto players do not share the same policy orientations, making political stalemate more likely. It is interesting noting that in all cases, less than half of the population tended to trust the national government, the parliament, or the political parties. This can be read as a signal of institutional dissatisfaction and, eventually, of institutional stress.

The following qualitative analysis highlights the endogenous factors of the reform processes, based on the theoretical framework. Reform processes are tracked from the emergence of the reform proposal to the final decision.

4.1. Failed Reforms

Six reforms between 2006 and 2016 ended with any change of the *status quo*. This raises concerns about both the reasons of failures, despite the premises, and the differences with the two successful cases. Ireland and Romania are two ‘outliers’ among the countries with failed reforms, as reforms’ advocates campaigned against the very existence of the second chamber, while in the other cases bicameralism *per se* was not put into question.

The Irish debate dates back to October 2009, when the then *Fine Gael*’s leader Enda Kenny announced – with no previous disclosure – that he would work for the abolition of the Senate (*Seanad Éireann*), a useless institution for the system’s need of a smooth decision-making in critical times.⁶ The announcement was made during an internal

Table 2. Indicators of ‘democratic stress’ in seven EU countries.

Case	Decline of mainstream parties		Inter-institutional conflict	Participation	Institutional dissatisfaction
	Two-party index (%)	Effective number of parties	Divided government	Electoral turnout (%)	Trust in national institutions (%) [*]
Belgium (2010)	31.1	10.0	No	89.2	22-28-20
Germany (2006)	62.0	4.5	No	77.7	28-36-18
Ireland (2011)	55.6	4.5	No	69.9	42-39-9
Italy/1 (2005)	46.0	6.3	No	81.4	29-35-20
Italy/2 (2014)	52.2	5.1	Yes	75.2	17-14-6
Romania (2009)	65.5	3.9	Yes	39.2	17-17-11
Spain (2004)	81.6	3	Yes	75.7	42-41-22
UK (2011)	65.1	3.7	No	65.8	32-29-18

^{*}Numbers refer to, respectively: tendential trust in the national government, national parliament, political parties.

Note: numbers refer to votes for party lists and the ‘two-party index’ is the sum of the votes gained by the two largest parties. Where applicable, ‘divided government’ indicates that the party majorities of the two parliamentary chambers differ and/or that the party majority in the first chamber differs from that supporting the elected head of state (see Elgie, 2001). Between brackets there is the year in which the reform was put on the public agenda and discussed. Data about votes and trust refer to the closest previous general election or the closest survey available.

Sources: Chiaramonte (2015); Döring and Manow (2018); Eurobarometer surveys; own calculations.

party meeting. *Fine Gael*, which was in opposition, agreed and put the reform in the party programme, in view of the upcoming 2011 general election. During the electoral campaign, both the Labour Party and *Sinn Féin* agreed on the necessity of abolishing the second chamber. *Fianna Fail* instead argued in favour of bundling the abolition with a broader parliamentary reform. In 2013, the government coalition made up of *Fine Gael* and the Labour Party approved the reform. However, a referendum was called, as provided by the constitution. *Fine Gael* stressed the benefits of the reform in terms of cost saving and reduction of MPs, depicting the change as the only actually viable. In contrast, the opposers campaigned for a reformed upper house. According to them, the abolition would be nothing but an attempt to distract citizens from economic problems. University senators played an important role within the opposing side: this is not surprising if one thinks that the Irish Senate comprises 11 senators appointed by the prime minister plus 49 indirectly elected members, of whom six are university representatives chosen by the University of Dublin and the National University of Ireland. Finally, on 4 October 2013, voters vetoed the abolition, with a ratio of rejections of 51.7% (the turnout was 39.2%).

The Romanian case presents an overturned situation. Over the years, citizens have perceived the strong Senate (*Senat*) as a redundant and inefficient second chamber (Avram & Radu, 2009). In 2009, the then elected Romanian president Traian Băsescu called a referendum to make the bicameral legislature unicameral; the referendum was held together with the first round of the presidential election, for which Băsescu was running for his second mandate. The campaign was characterised by the conflict between the president and the parliament (Chiva, 2015, pp. 208–209), which opposed the reform. Eventually, the referendum on 22 November 2009 provided a clear-cut victory for the president and the party that was supporting him: the turnout was 50.9% and 88.8% of valid votes asked for the abolition of the Senate. However, this result has had no binding consequences for the parliament, which has the final say. Thus, the boycott of the legislature and its parliamentary groups has been conducive to a dead-end for the pending reform project (Apahideanu, 2014, p. 81).

In the Spanish case, the nature and role of the Senate (*Senado*) have been discussed since when the current constitution was drafted in the 1970s (Varela Suanzes-Carpegna, 2006, pp. 149–152). The Spanish upper house is ‘the maximum expression of the participation of the Autonomous Communities in the central bodies of the autonomous Spanish State’ (Vírgala Foruria, 2013, p. 65). However, it remains a mostly elected chamber, with 78% of senators directly elected in provincial constituencies and 22% of members elected by Communities’ parliaments. The hiatus between the functions and the representative principle (in this case, mostly input-oriented democratic) has made the Senate a much-criticised institution, leading to several failed attempts of reform. During his investiture speech as prime minister on 15 April 2004, the Socialist leader José Luís Rodríguez Zapatero proposed a constitutional reform: one of the pillars was the transformation of the Senate in a fully-fledged chamber for territorial representation. The following public debate focussed primarily on the composition and functions of the second chamber (Varela Suanzes-Carpegna, 2006, pp. 161–162). In particular, Zapatero asked the Council of State⁷ to prepare a report on some proposals; this would have served as the basis to draft the possible reform. The Council suggested providing for a fixed number of seats for each Autonomous Community, to be increased according to population and

size. In parallel, it was proposed the direct election of all senators simultaneously with the elections for Communities' legislatures. This would enhance the chance of having a Senate reflecting political divisions of single Communities. The report was finally approved by the Council in 2006, but no official reform project was drafted (Virgala Foruria, 2013, pp. 70–73). It is worth noting that the main opposing party, the conservative *Partido Popular*, has often advocated an increase of Senate's veto powers on regional issues. However, recent surveys have shown that only 9% of Spaniards would opt for this solution. In contrast, most citizens would abolish the second chamber, while 28% would leave the Senate as it is. Only 11% would be supportive of the reform outlined by the Council's report in 2006 (Harguindéguy, Coller, & Cole, 2017, pp. 534–537).

The British debate on the reform of the House of Lords concerned both the composition and the type of legitimation. In 2010, the then in office Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition announced its intention to 'democratise' the second chamber. The main proposal included in a white paper of 2011 was the introduction of more directly elected members (Russell, 2012, p. 117). Eventually, the reform project suggested to settle a chamber with 80% of members directly and proportionally elected, based on regions and with non-renewable 15-year terms (in thirds). The remaining 20% would have been appointed and non-partisan, including 12 bishops (Russell, 2013b, p. 262). The proposal seemed to attract the appreciation of all the main parties. Before issuing the project, the Conservative had indeed supported the introduction of a mainly elected second chamber, and the Liberal Democrats (and the Labour alike) were inclined towards a fully elected house (Barber, 2014, p. 123). During the reforming process, the Lib-Dem leader Nick Clegg advocated the change. In its second reading on 10 July 2012, however, the bill passed with the opposition of 91 Conservative MPs; Labour agreed in principle, but the party decided to hinder the reform as a move against the government's programme motion. For these reasons, the government considered keeping on focussing on the project as too risky; Clegg soon declared that the reform attempt was failed (Russell, 2013b, pp. 265–266).

The reform of the second chamber has been a recurring issue also for Italian politicians and experts, who have often criticised the high level of symmetry between the two parliamentary branches (e.g. Vercesi, 2017). From 2006 to 2016, voters were asked twice to decide on broad reforms of bicameralism. In both cases, reformers pursued changes along all our three dimensions. In 2005, the then governing centre-right coalition supported the modification of the very nature of the Senate. In the same year, the parliament approved a constitutional reform, providing for a federal upper house. Reformers introduced the direct election of senators simultaneous to regional elections. The Senate would have lost the power to issue no-confidence motions; moreover, the upper house was endowed with the power to approve unilaterally bills concerning issues of concurring competence between the central State and regions. However, a popular referendum in 2006 rejected this package and the Senate remained in its original form. A centre-left government attempted a similar reform in 2016. Once again, it was claimed that a Senate without no-confidence powers was necessary. More than in 2005, the main rationale was to make the Italian institutional setting more adaptable to cope with new political and economic challenges in a faster way (Vercesi, 2017). The main political forces also wanted to reduce the coalitional blackmail potential of their opponents (Ceccarini & Bordignon, 2017). The Senate's power to approve legislation would have remained only for a

limited range of issues and however to be exercised together with the lower chamber. The new senators would have been indirectly elected by regional and local institutions (Pedrazzani, 2017, pp. 143–144). The project was supported by the coalition parties and was approved by the parliament. However, all the opposition parties strongly criticised the reform, especially the populist Five Star Movement and Salvini's League (Blokker, 2017). On 4 December 2016, more than 65% of citizens expressed their opinion in the constitutional binding referendum; almost 60% voted against the reform. Interestingly enough, data has shown that one of the most important motivation behind the vote was the desire to punish the governing parties (Bianchi, 2017; Draege & Dennison, 2018).

4.2. Successful Reforms

The first of the two successful reforms is the reduction of formal powers of the German *Bundesrat* of 2006. This reform aimed to redefine the German model of federalism (Burkhart, 2009), creating clearer divisions of competences between the central State and regional *Länder*. In the previous 35 years, the German system had been often depicted in the public debate as inclined to political gridlocks; in the late 1990s, the country was seen by the public opinion as no more able to cope with contemporary challenges (Woelk, 1999, p. 218). As underlined by Musella (2010, pp. 579–580), the most substantial step for reforming German federalism after the reunification was made by a bicameral parliamentary committee in 2003. Overall, the represented political parties agreed on the resulting project; however, the attempt temporarily failed because of an inter-party disagreement on education policy. The eventual deal of 2006 was reached by the then in office CDU-SPD Grand Coalition and came rather unexpected. In a contingent climate which was favourable to majoritarian practices, the government presented the reform as a way to modernise federalism in Germany. According to the main parties, the reform was necessary to lower citizens' discontent down and to block the potential rise of populist parties. Unlike the left-wing *Die Linke* and Greens, the Liberal Party (FDP) supported the plan (Burkhart, 2009, p. 341; Heinz, 2010; Musella, 2010, p. 591). The reform endowed *Länder* with a higher number of autonomous competencies, restricting at the same time *Bundesrat's* formal veto powers on legislation. The reform gave the upper house veto power only on those institutional bills and laws that concern the relationship between the centre and the regions (Musella, 2010, p. 587). Overall, the reform limited substantially the *Bundesrat's* power to block federal legislation.

The second successful reform was attained five years later in Belgium. The country went through a political crisis between 2007 and 2011, characterised by increasing federal disloyalty from the side of language communities and their consequent drifting apart from each other (Hooghe, 2012). In June 2010, Belgian citizens voted for the new parliament. However, the party system soon became stuck and parties reached an agreement for a new cabinet more than one and a half year later only. The impasse ensued from both ethno-regionalist divides and socio-economic challenges. Simultaneously, parties negotiated for more than one year a new constitutional reform (Sixth State Reform), reaching an agreement on 11 October 2011. The leader of the Socialist Party and later Prime Minister Elio di Rupo led the bargaining process. The main parties were involved, with the exception of the populist right-wing New Flemish Alliance – because of its refusal to participate in the debate – and the regionalist Francophone Democratic Federalists, who were

Table 3. Rationale, actors, and conclusion of reform processes of second chambers in the EU (2006–2016).

Case	Justification	Challenges*	Proponents	Support from main opposition parties	Conclusion of the process
Belgium	Misrepresenting	1; 3	Parties	Mostly	Inter-party agreement
Germany	Inefficient	All	Executive	Partial	Majority win
Ireland	Inefficient	3	Executive	No	Referendum
Italy/1	Inefficient	3	Executive	No	Referendum
Italy/2	Inefficient	1; 3	Executive	No	Referendum
Romania	Inefficient	All	Head of State	No	Parliamentary boycott
Spain	Misrepresenting	1; 3	Executive	No	Inter-party disagreement
UK	Illegitimate	3	Executive	No	Inter-party disagreement

*1=(*expected*) conflict between mainstream and new parties/inter-institutional conflict; 2=(*expected*) decreasing support for political parties; 3=(*expected*) institutional dissatisfaction.

Note: inefficiency comprises cases where the second chamber is considered a source of detrimental gridlocks for the decision-making, a not justified institution as it is, or even a useless chamber.

not satisfied with the compromise (Reuchamps, 2013, p. 386). The reform affected the method of selection of the Senate. Prior to the change, senators represented territorial communities: 40 were directly elected, 21 selected by territorial assemblies, and 10 were co-opted. The reform reduced the number of members and introduced 50 senators indirectly elected, based on electoral results in regional elections. Moreover, it was decided to leave 10 members, who have been co-opted by peers, according to the electoral results for the first chamber. Secondly, reformers harmonised the timing between general and regional elections, leaving however the freedom to regions to decide the length of the own legislative term and the date of their internal elections (Goossens & Cannoot, 2015, pp. 38–40; Reuchamps, 2013, pp. 386–387). The new Senate, whose modification came into force with the 2014 general election, turned to be a chamber with legislative powers, which are circumscribed to institutional matters. Overall, the constitutional reform was conducive to a shift of powers from the centre to the federated entities (Goossens, 2017; Goossens & Cannoot, 2015).

5. Discussion

The analytical overview of the reform processes of bicameralism in Europe suggests some tentative interpretations, based on the theoretical arguments about the linkage between ‘democratic’ and ‘institutional stress’. Table 3 summarises the picture.

We can cluster the main arguments used by the advocates of the reforms into three types of justification. Only in the British case, the target was the legitimacy of the chamber, which does not match modern democratic ideas about representation. Where divisive debates about cultural-ethnic cleavages exist (Belgium and Spain), the rationale of the second chamber (i.e. representation of territorial units) was not put into question; rather the goal was a more straightforward representation of regions. However, in most of the cases, the criticism pointed to the inefficiency of the chamber. Overall, we thus have two goals: to lower down the power of second chambers as veto points and to reshape their representative capacity. This is in line with our theoretical premises.

In all cases, at least one of the three main challenges to the political system was present. Institutional dissatisfaction may well be present also when democracy does not experience ‘stress’ (at least, as it is defined here). If we exclude this condition, we however find that in

more than 50% of the cases the reform was put in agenda by traditional elites under the threat of new party contesters or in context of conflict between institutions. Moreover, in Ireland the emergence of the debate about the institutional inefficiency of the Senate seems to be related to the specific moment of ‘stress’ experienced by the country. This differentiates Ireland from Italy/1, Spain, and the UK, where the reform of bicameralism had been a recurring topic in the public debate also before the change of conditions of the 2000s. It is also worth noting that in all but one case, the executive (either the PM/cabinet or the president in the semi-presidential Romania) called for the reform; in Belgium all traditional parties agreed to cooperate to overcome a deep political stalemate. Eventually, most parties in opposition supported the reform project only in the two successful cases (Belgium and Germany), leading to a less conflictual process. This applies especially to Belgium, where the ‘stress’ of the system was at its peak. This corroborates the idea that consensus is a crucial element for institutional reform bundles.

Unlike in Belgium, German reformers had the chance to reach their goal simply with the agreement of the grand coalition majority. Inter-party (and intra-majority) disagreement made the reform fail in Spain and the United Kingdom. Where the constitution provides for a binding popular referendum, voters ultimately vetoed the reform. Romania is an exception moving the other way round (inter-institutional conflict blocked voters’ approval). A further finding is that a general agreement on the necessity to reform bicameralism prior to the discussion could be generally found even in those countries where the debate was more divisive and where the reform failed.

With regard to our propositions, we have mixed evidence. The first proposition seems corroborated. In all but the British and Spanish cases reformers tried to weaken the second chamber at least along one dimension, especially in terms of formal powers. In the two federal countries (Belgium and Germany), this was accompanied by a reorganisation of the state, which strengthened regional territories. However, chambers’ veto power was a major target and in most cases the chamber was depicted as an ‘out-of-date’/inefficient institution in context of serious political conflict. In five cases, the second chamber was deemed inefficient against the goals of the system; in two cases, reformers argued that, if not the chamber *per se*, the method for selecting MPs was ineffective if valued against the chamber’s representative function. Except for Germany, we can only speculate that governing elites proposed reforms to preserve their position in the system. However, the compresence of crucial exogenous conditions and the behaviour of mainstream parties are overall in line also with the second proposition.

Seldom contesters of mainstream parties agreed on the reform. Our cases suggest – according to the fourth proposition – that the relative instability of the party competition in the 2000s were detrimental when it came to find broad inter-party consensus. This especially holds in those cases where governing elites had to face the opposition of new/populist parties. The failures of Irish and Italian referenda could be indicators of the difficulty met by mainstream governing parties to mobilise voters. Even the successful referendum in Romania can be interpreted as the result of the misalignment between voters and parties, inasmuch as voters decided to support the monocratic president against the parliament. Overall, it seems plausible that in ‘stressed’ democracies ruling elites are keener to reform upper houses, in particular by targeting their veto power. However, the same factors that make a democracy ‘stressed’ put the system in a vicious circle of contestation and difficult adaptation.

This observation leads to a final remark about the connection between the concept of ‘democratic stress’ and the outcomes of the reform process. As said in the second section, this ‘stress’ is likely to increase the demand for institutional reforms. However, proposers can be moved by different motivations, depending on their role in the political system. The stress that representative democracies are witnessing can be observed through given phenomena, such as the crisis of mainstream parties and the lower support for governing elites, lower levels of political participation, and a generalised voters’ dissatisfaction with existing representative institutions. These factors have been depicted as exogenous. In other words, they create the conditions for reform to be proposed. However, the same factors do not account for the outcome (success or failure), at least not on their own. What they are likely to explain is rather why reforms are put on the agenda. Moreover, they trigger reform processes mostly when they work jointly, and not as single variables with an own net effect.

The outcome of the reform process, on its turn, seems to be mostly explainable through contingent (endogenous) factors. This applies in particular to the cases of failed reforms, where, in spite of favourable conditions, reformers could not achieve their goals. These contingent factors are related to party strategies; to the emergence (or absence) of windows of opportunity for reaching broader consensus within the political system; as well as to the nature of the proposed reform itself. A systematic assessment of the effects of these factors is out of the scope of this article. However, some interesting clues about the relationship between contingent factors and structural conditions have been provided: the stress experienced by traditional forms of representative democracy seems to increase the likelihood of parliamentary reforms (in line with our previous knowledge), but this stress cannot account *per se* for the success of reforms. Only an analysis that relates contingent party behaviours to the content of reforms can complete the picture. The structural indicators of democratic stress should be seen as tendentially sufficient (but not necessary) conditions for reform proposals. However, they are not sufficient for the reforms to be adopted.

6. Conclusion

As stated in the first part, this article has been exploratory, rather than explanatory, and directed towards hypothesis-generation. The eight case studies helped gather systematic empirical information, based on the existing knowledge on the linkage between democratic crisis and institutional reform. They provide material for pursuing a fruitful back-and-forth process between theory and data.

One puzzle of the findings is that, despite political willingness and favourable premises, most reform processes failed. This contrast is indicative of the democratic ‘stress’ this special issue focuses on. Democracies can pursue reforms to catch up with public demands, but reform outcomes are often unable to meet the initial expectations. The literature provides some sparks for further discussion. Long-lasting institutions are unlikely to be largely modified due to path-dependent increasing returns (Pierson, 2000); Spain is a case in point (Harguindéguy et al., 2017, pp. 537–539). Moreover, ‘where constitutional reform must be passed by referendum, it is considered unlikely that changes of [...] significance can be made’ (Russell & Sandford, 2002, p. 83).⁸ This would explain Irish and Italian failures, along with more contingent factors. In Ireland, several voters did not

vote for the referendum due to a lack of interest, for practical reasons, or lack of understanding. In contrast, those defending the *Seanad* felt pushed to vote. Dissatisfaction with the government was another major factor accounting for rejection (MacCarthaigh & Martin, 2015). A similar motivation moved many Italian voters in 2016 (Ceccarini & Bordignon, 2017). The Italian case shows that reformers' strategic mistakes and party conflicts can jeopardise reforms, even those for which a large consensus in principle exists (Bianchi, 2017; Draege & Dennison, 2018). In the UK, the conditions appeared favourable for change (Russell & Sandford, 2002). However, intra-coalition divisions took the reform to a dead-end, with the Prime Minister Cameron defining the project a 'third term issue' (quoted in [Russell, 2013b, p. 265]). Overall, the lesson is that environmental incentives and political goodwill are not sufficient. In Belgium and Germany, party leaders could take advantage of very specific windows of opportunity created by critical political phases and reach wider agreements. Moreover, the Romanian case tells that public support is not enough. Inter-institutional consensus matters. In fact, Belgian and German reformers found consensus in the system at large, reviewing the distribution of competencies between levels of government.

This article has contributed to the debate on the renewal of participatory channels and practices in Europe. The nature of bicameralism provides us insights about the level of institutional flexibility of democracies and their ability to absorb democratic stress. Further research could add theoretical, methodological, and empirical material to the discussion. Theoretically, the theme of second chambers' strength could be connected to the specific analysis of executive's prerogatives or to the interplay between central and sub-national institutions in multi-level systems; in this regard, this article suggests that these factors are likely to affect reforms and outcomes in different contexts. Secondly, explanatory mechanisms linking democratic stress, institutions, and agency could be investigated through a deeper focus on a fewer illustrative cases. Scholars should pay attention to longitudinal dynamics: in this regard, process tracing could be useful (Bennett & Checkel, 2014). Finally, empirical fresh data can be generated through cross-sectional comparisons with those extra-European systems where political actors have recently called for reforms (e.g. Australia, Canada); a further path would be to compare recent reforms with analogous previous attempts. In this way, analyses could benefit from the introduction of a crucial factor such as the change of the opportunity structure. This would improve our knowledge, by integrating the preliminary findings we have been provided with in this article.

Notes

1. See data in IDEA's *Voter Turnout Database* (www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout).
2. Following comparative literature, henceforth upper chamber is used as synonym of both second chamber and upper house.
3. Bedock (2017, p. 112) highlights the reinforcing effect that the 2008 economic crisis could have had on the impact of the more general 'crisis of representative democracy'. In other words, reforms' political determinants could be shaped by economic crises. This article posits economic conditions as fixed environmental background, which is not a direct determinant of reforms.
4. The nature of the institution to reform may count too (Bedock, 2017, p. 47). In our case, however, we can assume this aspect as given (or at least to vary only a little), since we focus on reforms of the same institution across systems.

5. As Bedock (2017, p. 257) points out, ‘low political support triggers democratic reforms, in a context where [... discontented voters] flourish’. The empirical evidence gathered in her book shows that the causal link between these factors is indeed ‘strong, statistically significant [... , and] negative’.
6. The analysis of the Irish case is based on MacCarthaigh and Martin (2013).
7. The Spanish Council of State is a consultative body of the Spanish government.
8. Given the narrow focus of this article, I have not stressed the institutional mechanisms that in each country allow altering institutional powers. But future investigations could add this. With regard to our cases, there is however little variation. Only the UK allowed changes with the approval of an ordinary parliamentary majority, while the other systems are characterised by constitutional rigidity. Ireland and Italy ask for a binding popular referendum, if the modification is voted by an ordinary majority. Belgium and Spain required a 2/3 (or equivalent) majority, while Germany and Romania reach the highest level of rigidity, requiring a qualified majority of more than 2/3 (Lijphart, 2012, p. 208; Roberts, 2006).

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Notes on contributor

Michelangelo Vercesi is Research Associate in Comparative Politics at Leuphana University in Lüneburg and holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Pavia. He worked and spent visiting periods in Italy, Germany, Austria, and the UK. He is elected member of the executive board of the international Research Committee on Political Sociology (CPS). His research focuses on political elites and leadership, political institutions, political parties. On these topics, he has published several chapters and articles in peer-reviewed journals, such as *Parliamentary Affairs*, *Government and Opposition*, *Regional & Federal Studies*, *European Politics and Society*. E-mail: michelangelo.vercesi@leuphana.de

ORCID

Michelangelo Vercesi  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5723-5076>

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