

Elite clubs as career elevator? Mixed evidence from the Bilderberg Group

Abstract

This article is the first systematic examination of the proposition that politicians can foster their careers through affiliations with transnational elite clubs. Focusing on the Euro-Atlantic Bilderberg Group, I provide preliminary evidence in support of the proposition. I argue that politicians invited to the exclusive meetings gain valuable contacts, insider information and probably some backing. Still, most politicians who participated at Bilderberg conferences were never later elevated. But 133 were and sometimes even shortly after their appearance at the gatherings. Of these mainly European politicians, 42 became prime ministers, presidents, or top representatives of international organizations like EU, NATO, IMF. However, I mostly found correlation, not causation. Only in several cases, there are additional indicia which suggest that “factor Bilderberg” was really one of the reasons for career advancements. On the other hand, the suspicion of the Bilderberg Group’s direct influence on personnel policy cannot be confirmed.

Keywords Bilderberg Group · Political elite · Social capital · Career · Networking · Favoritism · EU

(...) (...)

Generally, we should focus especially on international organizations because their representatives are appointed by elites, not elected by voters. Hence, for Bilderbergers, it would not be so difficult to influence the nomination processes in EU or NATO. Indeed, as documented below, there are many remarkable personnel overlaps between participants at Bilderberg meetings and appointees to highest positions in EU and NATO.

From 2019 to 2023, all key international organizations—EU, NATO, IMF, and UN—have been chaired by Bilderbergers (Ursula von der Leyen, Jens Stoltenberg, Kristalina Georgieva and Antonio Guterres). It seems improbable that this is just a coincidence.

(...) (...)

This study is informed by seminal book from Kendall (2008), who focused on exclusive US city, country and “wall-less” clubs like Bohemian Club, Petroleum Club, Headliners Club etc. In these organizations, members of diverse elites strengthen ties with one another, including sense of mutual

loyalty and reciprocity. As a result, affiliations with such clubs contribute to enhancement of social, cultural, and political capital.

Kendall points out that “privileged people gain greater access to powerful positions in the local, state, and federal branches of the government” and that “they do this partly through extensive social networks among elite club members” (2008: 112). Fellows from clubs also “nominate each other to serve on the governing boards of corporations, universities, hospitals” (2008: 49).

(...) (...)

Shore focused on the European Commission and networks inside (and around) this body. He cites EU insider, who admits that these networks have had impact on personnel policy: “If you’re not an Enarque, a Catholic, a Socialist... it is difficult to make your way here. (...) If you don’t belong to any of these, it’s difficult to advance your career.” (2005: 139). Another EU insider even speaks about “mafias”—French, socialist, Opus Dei, freemason, and homosexual mafia (2005: 141).

The role of elite clubs and networks has been also highlighted by (neo)Marxist scholars. **Gramsci focused on Italian Masonic lodges, which in his eyes cemented “a bond amongst the government officials” (Cox 1983: 164).**

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Marxist perspective was also used by Gill (2009), who wrote groundbreaking monograph on the Trilateral Commission, whose members have been partly overlapping with those of the Bilderberg Group. **Gill points out that at least three World Bank presidents (Robert McNamara, Alden Clausen, Barber Conable) were Trilateralists (2009: 258). Furthermore, after Trilateralist Jimmy Carter became US president, he appointed numerous Trilateralists (Zbigniew Brzezinski, Walter Mondale, Cyrus Vance, Harold Brown, Michael Blumenthal, Henry Owen, Robert Bowie, Paul Volcker etc.) in various senior posts (2009: 166).** Ronald Reagan initially attacked the Trilateral Commission, but then gradually incorporated (ex)Trilateralists (like Caspar Weinberger and Alexander Haig) into his administration (2009: 167-168).

As a result, some critics regarded the Trilateral Commission as “capitalist springboard for elevation to political power” (2009: 171). Even the Trilateral Commission’s sponsor—the Ford Foundation —acknowledged that benefits of the Trilateral Commission’s membership included “introductions into wider networks, platforms for attempts to gain high office” (2009: 150). The same is true for the Bilderberg Group. Gill notes that

Bilderbergers (Dean Rusk, George McGhee, George Ball, Walt Rostow, McGeorge Bundy, Arthur Dean, Paul Nitze) “were especially prominent” in J. F. Kennedy’s administration (2009: 131).

Marxists’ conviction that the upper social echelons coordinate themselves is largely shared by elite theorists. Mosca portrayed the (political) elite as “an organized minority,” in contrast to the unorganized majority (the masses). Thanks to its tiny size, it is easier for the elite to “act in concert” (Tashjean 1972: 124–125). In Mosca’s view, the minority not only out-organizes the majority, but also outwits it (Higley 2010: 161). Pareto saw deception/fraud as one of the instruments that elites use to maintain their rule (Best-Higley, 2018: 22).

In his paradigmatic book, Mills (1956) argued that American society was dominated by the small “power elite” which consisted of top decision-makers from— increasingly intertwining—political, economic, and military spheres. In this sense, **the Bilderberg Group mirrors the power elite...**

(...) (...)

I mainly draw on and extend the work of Wedel. She claims that “Elite power resides not as much in formal organizations or roles, but, much more than in the past, substantially derives from players’ positions in informal social networks and links to organizations and venues connecting elites across a global plane.” (Wedel 2017: 168–169) I add that the Bilderberg Group can be regarded as one of such networks and venues.

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As an example of shadow elites, Wedel mentions (the circles around) Richard Perle and Robert Rubin. I add that both these Americans are also prominent Bilderbergers (they together attended six Bilderberg conferences between 2010 and 2015).

Wedel asserts that shadow elites can take on the form of “flex net,” (...) (...) “Flex nets are not conspiracies (...) While some of the group’s activities... are publicly unrevealed, others are fully in the open” (2011: 161). In this sense, Bilderberg network may qualify as a flex net.

(...) (...)

Like freemasons, Bilderbergers are encouraged to form some kind of friendly community or even fraternity. This probably includes willingness to help each other, possibly also in professional life. As Thompson (1980: 171) put it: “efforts are made to deepen and broaden contacts among Bilderbergers. There is “the unwritten rule that anybody who has ever been to a Bilderberg Conference should be able to feel that he can, in a private capacity, call on any former member he has met.”

(...) (...)

participation at Bilderberg conference in Turkey in 1975 helped Margaret Thatcher in gaining connections in US power circles.

(...) (...)

First, it is necessary to recall that Macron worked at Rothschild bank from 2008 to 2012. Representatives of this bank are regular participants of Bilderberg conferences. Edmond de Rothschild joined the Bilderberg Group's steering committee in the mid-1960s (Zieliński 2017: 115).

Before Macron, another ex-employee of Rothschild bank became French president—Georges Pompidou in 1969. And Pompidou too first appeared at Bilderberg conference and then rose to the top of the French political pyramid (Le Journal du Dimanche, 2.12.2017).

(...) (...)

Macron belongs to trio of French Bilderbergers who appointed one another into governmental functions.

(...) (...)

Thus, it can be assumed that **Bilderbergers invited Merkel to establish or strengthen the connections between would-be PM and the already incorporated members of the Euro-Atlantic elite.**

The same reason was probably behind Merkel's acceptance of the invitation. At Bilderberg conference, Merkel could have been introduced to the elite similarly as was Bill Clinton in 1991 (see Table 2), when he served as governor of Arkansas.

One anonymous "established Bilderberg attendee" provided this account of Bilderberg gathering in 1991 in Germany: "I remember Vernon Jordan, a very powerful man in the democratic world... **he came up to me and said, 'Meet the next President of the United States' and introduced me to Clinton.** I'd never heard of Clinton, it was well before he ran for President [...but] I thought 'Verdon Jordan's a wise old man, I'll keep my eye on him'. And it was interesting because Clinton was obviously quite something—as, indeed, he proved to be." (Richardson-Kakabadse-Kakabadse, 2011: 173).

(...) (...)

So, it is reasonable to assume that power broker Jordan (successfully) pursued two interconnected objectives. First, to enable his fellow Bilderbergers to familiarize with the possible next US president before his candidacy would be announced to general public. And second, to enhance Clinton's status in (international) elite circles and by extension, his chances to really become next US president.

In other words: **prominent Bilderberger Jordan helped in career advancement of Bilderberger Clinton. Yet is such favoritism**

among members of private elite network compatible with democratic ethos?

(...) (...)

In other words: **prominent Bilderberger Jordan contributed to career advancement of Bilderberger Wolfensohn, via another Bilderberger Clinton.** This is clear evidence that at least sometimes, Bilderbergers help each other in gaining influential and lucrative positions.

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At that meeting, Barroso allegedly sought to mobilize support for Georgieva's candidacy to the top position at UN: **"According to information obtained by Euractiv, Barroso organized the Bilderberg gathering to lobby for Georgieva's nomination as a candidate for UN Secretary-General."** (Euractiv.com, 10.6.2016).

For my argument, it is not decisive that eventually, Georgieva was not selected as the head of UN (interestingly, **the 2016 race was won by another Bilderberger Guterres**).

(...) (...)

On 12.11.2009, **one week before key summit in Brussels, Van Rompuy "hosted a Bilderberg event in Brussels, in order to secure his appointment"** (Euractiv.com, 10.6.2016).

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By the way, the summit on 19.11.2009 was chaired by Fredrik Reinfeldt, who attended Bilderberg conference in 2006 (see Table 17). And Reinfeldt promoted Van Rompuy

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Von der Leyen participated at four Bilderberg conferences in important years (2015, 2016, 2018 and 2019). She also served on the board of trustees of the World Economic Forum. As key news outlet on EU openly states: "Bilderberg. Davos. Munich. (...) Ursula von der Leyen (...) has quietly built an extensive international network in politics and business — **connections that won her the nod for the EU's top job** (...) (...) It's thanks to her international network that her political career is still alive." (Politico, 11.7.2019).

(...) (...)

To rephrase one bonmot: **not all political attendees of Bilderberg conference(s) became later prime ministers, but many prime ministers participated at some Bilderberg conference(s) before they reached the top government post.** Examples include both right-wing and left-wing politicians like Canadian PMs Paul Martin and Stephen

Harper, British PMs Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, French PMs Lionel Jospin, Manuel Valls and Édouard Philippe, German PMs Angela Merkel and Olaf Scholz, Italian PM Enrico Letta, Spanish PM Pedro Sánchez, Austrian PM Alfred Gusenbauer, Dutch PM Wim Kok, Norwegian PM Erna Solberg, Swedish PMs Fredrik Reinfeldt, Stefan Löfven and Magdalena Andersson, Danish PMs Anders F. Rasmussen and Helle Thorning-Schmidt, Finnish PM Jyrki Katainen, Greek PMs George Papandreou, Kostas Karamanlis and Kyriakos Mitsotakis.

The case of Portugal is most striking—five Portugal politicians (Guterres, Barroso, Pedro Santana Lopes, Jose Socrates, and Antonio Costa) became prime ministers after their appearance at Bilderberg conference(s). Moreover, **Bilderberg conference in 2004 was attended by even two future Portugal PMs—Lopes and Socrates (see Table 15). At that time, Socrates was mere MP, but already next year he became PM.**

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Macron was elevated by another Bilderberger—Manuel Valls, who occupied the office of Prime Minister from March 2014 and who appeared at Bilderberg conference in 2008 (see Table 19).

Moreover, **on 14 May 2017, Macron reached the position of French president. And the next day, another Bilderberger—Philippe—became new Prime Minister. Philippe attended Bilderberg conference in 2016 (see Table 27), at that time as mere mayor.**

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EU has been overcrowded by Bilderbergers. After their appearance at some Bilderberg conference(s), many politicians were installed to all highest functions in EU. These people occupied or occupy the posts of (1) president of the European Commission (Barroso, von der Leyen), (2) member of the European Commission (Joao Pinheiro, Ritt Bjerregaard, Gunther Verheugen, Frits Bolkestein, Antonio Vitorino, Joaquin Almunia, Peter Mandelson, Pedro Solbes Mira, Elisa Ferreira, Connie Hedegaard, Frans Timmermans, Jutta Urpilainen, Margrethe Vestager), (3) president of the European Central Bank (Christine Lagarde, Mario Draghi, Jean-Claude Trichet), (4) president of Eurogroup (Paschal Donohoe), (5) president of the European Council (Charles Michel), (6) president of the European parliament (Pat Cox), (7) EU Brexit negotiator (Michel Barnier), (8) EU special representative for the Southern Mediterranean (Bernardino León Gross), (9) EU antiterrorism coordinator (Gijs de Vries), (10) EU ombudsman (Nikiforos Diamandouros). This raises suspicion that in EU's nomination processes, Bilderbergers are the preferred candidates.

Interestingly, **von der Leyen and Michel attended the same Bilderberg conference in 2015 (see Table 26) and subsequently in**

the same year 2019 they both gained highest positions in EU. It could be mere coincidence, but this version does not seem probable.

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interestingly, both Wörner and Solana had their Bilderberg première in 1985 (...) So, in fact, **all post-Cold War general secretaries of NATO participated at some Bilderberg conference prior to their appointment.** Plus, three political attendees of Bilderberg conference(s) (Karl Lamers, Pierre Lellouche, Bert Koenders) became later presidents of NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

Other political participants of Bilderberg conference(s) were subsequently installed into top positions at IMF (Rodrigo de Rato, Christine Lagarde, Kristalina Georgieva), World Bank Group (Paul Wolfowitz, Ad Melkert, Robert Zoellick, Frank Heemskerk) and WTO (Renato Ruggiero, Pascal Lamy).

Georgieva's leadership of IMF is another clear instance of favoritism among Bilderbergers. Georgieva had strong backing from Macron, whose support was seen as "crucial." So much that **the selection rules were sidestepped or changed in favor of Georgieva:**

"Georgieva did not even meet the terms of the complex voting system France devised (...) There was one more twist. The day before nominations closed, the IMF changed the rules to remove the age limit of 65 for a new managing director; Georgieva turned 66 in August." (South China Morning Post, 3.10.2019)

The current general secretary of UN Antonio Guterres also attended Bilderberg conferences (see Table 1) prior to his appointment. **During Guterres mandate, at least two Bilderbergers (Miguel Ángel Moratinos and Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert) were selected as UN representatives.** Moratinos became UN High-Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations. So far, this position has been held by three people and the first holder Jorge Sampaio also appeared at Bilderberg conference (see Table 10) before his appointment.

(...) (...)

when it comes to lucrative posts, there are usually many (potential) aspirants, often comparably strong in terms of qualifications. So, in the end, what can decide are personal connections—who knows (better) whom and who backs (more) whom.

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In general, social capital cannot be lost so quickly and completely as political (in case of enforced resignation) or economic (in case of bankruptcy) capital. Politicians retain almost the same volume of social capital even after their departure from public offices. That is why many

former politicians are still welcomed at Bilderberg conclaves (for example: **Dominique Strauss-Kahn attended Bilderberg conference for the first time in 2000 as an ex-minister; in 2007, he was appointed director of IMF**).

(...) (...)

I observe that many Bilderbergers were appointed to top positions in key international organizations. This is in line with one conclusion of existing research, namely that social capital of candidates plays biggest role in selection processes for the upper-level jobs, especially those that involve important interaction with outside institutions and groups (Lin-Cook-Burt, 2017: 128, 143).

(...) (...)

Some streams of social capital scholarship stress the importance of inequality of social capital (Lin-Cook-Burt, 2017: 20) and closure vis-à-vis outsiders (Lin-Cook-Burt, 2017: 10). **Bilderberg conclaves are perfect embodiment of both inequality and closure. Consequently, the invitation to Bilderberg should also be seen as special power instrument.** In a sense, the invited politicians were those favored and preferred, since all the others—the vast majority—were denied the same access to global elite. Already through this sheer exclusivity of invitations, the Bilderberg Group might have been able to (slightly) co-influence the probability that someone will (not) rise to political leadership.

(...) (...)

One general objection toward the TCC thesis is that it overplays the significance of transnationalization processes and underestimates the continuing persistence of national or regional elements. (...) Although not definitive and extensive enough, **my observations might have some value for both camps of the dispute around TCC.**

I found two cases when Bilderbergers from same country helped each other (the American and the French trio), so here the national frameworks do not appear to be transcended. But I also came across three cases when Bilderberger helped another Bilderberger from different country (Barroso's lobbying for Georgieva, Macron's lobbying for Georgieva and Osborne's appointment of Carney), so here we can speak of some sings of transnationalism.

Nonetheless, on balance, this investigation (like other studies) indicates that to large extent, **Bilderberg network is structured along regional lines.** Conceived as mutual ties, social capital seems to be greater among European Bilderbergers or North-American Bilderbergers than among European and North-American, let alone Turkish Bilderbergers.

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it is necessary to stress that personnel policy need not be discussed only at (the sidelines of) Bilderberg annual conferences, but also at more frequent and more exclusive meetings of the Bilderberg Group's steering committee. However, meetings of this committee are surrounded by even more secrecy than the conferences.

(...) (...)

Very interesting is the case of Georgieva—in two different years (2016 and 2019), two different Bilderbergers (Barroso and Macron) tried to help her gain two different top positions (UN Secretary-General and managing director of IMF). Whereas the first (Barroso's) attempt was not successful, the second (Macron's) resulted in Georgieva's appointment.

French Bilderbergers appointed each other to governmental functions. Bilderberger Philippe made career also thanks to Bilderberger Macron, who was previously elevated also thanks to Bilderberger Valls.

(...) (...)

One can even speak of “revolving door” between the European Commission and the Bilderberg Group. Just consider the case of Barroso—he first attended Bilderberg conferences (in 1994 and 2003) and then became president of the European Commission (from 2004 to 2014). And after leaving this position, Barroso joined the Bilderberg Group's steering committee. Davignon has similar career trajectory...

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