

# REFORMING the EUROPEAN UNION

*Realizing the Impossible*

DANIEL FINKE, THOMAS KÖNIG,  
SVEN-OLIVER PROKSCH  
& GEORGE TSEBELIS

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Sven-Oliver Proksch, and George Tsebelis*

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## Introduction

Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux.  
(One must imagine Sisyphus happy.)

—Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*

THIS BOOK STUDIES a Sisyphean effort: the reform of the European Union (EU). Every three to four years, the EU has tried to assess and reform its institutions from the mid-1980s to the beginning of the twenty-first century, but with little success. In the meantime, reform became even more necessary due to enlargements that integrated twelve countries from Eastern and Southern Europe and brought the total number of EU countries to twenty-seven. Europe's political leaders launched a major reform attempt in 2001, and, after many backlashes and crises that led observers and students of the EU to the conclusion that such efforts had failed, the reform of the EU and its institutions was achieved eight years later at the end of 2009. Sisyphus had finally pushed his rock to the top of the mountain.

Given the global importance of the EU, these are significant events not only for scholars of the European Union but also for people who want to understand the contemporary world. So, describing accurately what happened is a worthwhile enterprise. But beyond describing the current events, we deal with an unstudied theoretical puzzle: institutional change. There is little theory and even less evidence on institutional change, and many analysts have adopted the concept of "punctuated equilibrium" from evolutionary biology according to which stasis (lack of change) prevails most of the time, and when change occurs it is rapid. What occurred in the EU, however, was neither rapid change nor a punctuated equilibrium. Instead, it was a process through which stasis was followed by painstakingly slow change. The reason for the slow rate of change was the opposition to far-reaching institutional reform from a minority of political leaders. As expected, enlargement of the EU in both 2004 and 2007 increased the group of political leaders opposed to reform. The puzzle we are facing is why an enlarged EU of twenty-seven member states succeeded while a smaller EU of fifteen member states had failed many times before. Ultimately, we argue that reform was achieved by a lengthy and complex trial and error process. This book shows how political leaders pushing for reform were capable of con-