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The Spitzenkandidaten Procedure: Reflecting on the Future of an Electoral Experiment

by Johannes Müller Gómez and Wolfgang Wessels

ABSTRACT

The 2014 European Parliament (EP) elections introduced a novel procedure to elect the President of the European Commission: the so-called Spitzenkandidaten, i.e. pan-European lead candidates nominated by the European political parties. The two main purposes behind this innovation were to mobilise the electorate and to strengthen the EP. The first use of the Spitzenkandidaten model established a new *modus operandi* of the EP at the expense of the European Council, which now has to appoint the lead candidate whose party won most seats in the European elections. However, it also contributed to polarising citizens' attitudes towards the EU and did not overcome the tendency to compete in European elections on purely national issues. Future adjustments of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure should aim to improve the EU's responsiveness and make the elections more European. Introducing primaries for the nominations of the Spitzenkandidaten could be a first step, eventually leading to the direct election of the Commission President.

European Union | European Parliament | Political parties | Elections | Democratic legitimacy

keywords

IAI WORKING PAPERS 16 | 08 - MARCH 2016 ISSN 2280-4331 | ISBN 978-88-98650-87-3

The Spitzenkandidaten Procedure: Reflecting on the Future of an Electoral Experiment

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Introduction

The 2014 elections to the European Parliament (EP) introduced a new procedure to elect the President of the European Commission: the so-called Spitzenkandidaten, i.e. pan-European lead candidates nominated by the European political parties.

Demands for such a practice at the European level – for the sake of arguably strengthening the democratic nature of the EU polity – were well-known before 2014.[1] However, after the Lisbon Treaty set the legal framework (see Box 1), the EP and the European Commission – but also national representatives[2] – encouraged the European political parties to nominate European lead candidates in the run-up to the last EP elections. Against the backdrop of the economic crisis, which was dominated by intergovernmental decisions[3] and the furthering of technocratic structures,[4] the advocacy for this further development in the European elections became even stronger.

[1] See for instance Andreas Follesdal and Simon Hix, "Why There is a Democratic Deficit in the EU: A Response to Majone and Moravcsik", in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (September 2006), p. 533-562, http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2006.00650.x.

[2] Such as the Future Europe Group which comprised the Foreign Ministers of Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and Spain. Future of Europe Group, *Final Report*, 17 September 2012, http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/cae/servlet/contentblob/626338/publicationFile/171798/120918-Abschlussbericht-Zukunftsgruppe.pdf.

[3] Wolfgang Wessels, *The European Council*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 187-219; Sergio Fabbrini, "Intergovernmentalism and Its Limits: Assessing the European Union's Answer to the Euro Crisis", in *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 9 (September 2013), p. 1003-1029.

[4] Frank Schimmelfennig, "Liberal Intergovernmentalism and the Euro Area Crisis", in *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2015), p. 177-195.

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Paper prepared within the context of "Governing Europe", a joint project led by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and Centro Studi sul Federalismo (CSF) of Turin in the framework of the strategic partnership with Compagnia di San Paolo, International Affairs Programme.

IAI WORKING PAPERS 16 | 09 - MARCH 2016 ISSN 2280-4331 | ISBN 978-88-98650-87-3

Box 1 | Election of the President of the European Commission according to Article 17(7) TEU

Taking into account the elections to the European Parliament and after having held the appropriate consultations, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall propose to the European Parliament a candidate for President of the Commission. This candidate shall be *elected by the European Parliament by a majority of its component members*. If he does not obtain the required majority, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall within one month propose a new candidate who shall be elected by the European Parliament following the same procedure.

(Emphasis added by the authors)

Juncker's Commission has been in office for one year. It is time to take stock of the first application of the Spitzenkandidaten concept in order to reflect on possible improvements of this novel procedure.

We will start by briefly summarising the academic debate on the need for and the risks of politicising EU politics. Based on the main objectives behind the Spitzenkandidaten procedure, we will then assess the implications and the shortcomings of the 2014 experiment. Subsequently, a theory-guided outlook for the electoral process in 2019 will be provided by pointing to uncertainties, institutional arrangements and incentives that (might) prevent further developments. Finally, we will discuss recommendations on how the electoral procedure could be improved both within and beyond the current Treaty provisions.

1. Spitzenkandidaten: A contested model

Politically, the introduction of Spitzenkandidaten was highly disputed. Although several Heads of State or Government sympathised with the new procedure, there was a coalition led by the British Prime Minister which was opposed to or at least reluctant to adopt the nomination of the victorious lead candidate as Commission President. Even the European Parliament did not have a unitary position on this issue – a fact which is often overlooked. 33 percent percent of the Members of the European Parliament (MEP) of the in-coming parliament represented national parties whose European umbrella parties did not nominate lead candidates. 23 percent of the MEPs even belonged to political groups in the EP which deliberately opposed the Spitzenkandidaten procedure. Hesitant members of the European Council such as the German chancellor and the Swedish and Dutch prime ministers, in the end, decided to vote in favour of Juncker, and the Hungarian and British heads of government were outvoted. This actual application of a qualified majority voting in the European Council has to be recorded as a significant precedent.[5]

[5] Wolfgang Wessels, *The European Council*, cit., p. 80.

IAI WORKING PAPERS 16 | 09 - MARCH 2016 ISSN 2280-4331 | ISBN 978-88-98650-87-3

Eventually, the European Parliament elected the proposed candidate with a large majority of 422 votes.

Besides political scepticism, academic concerns were also expressed. The concrete events of 2014 can be embedded in the long-standing debate regarding the need, on the one hand, and the risk, on the other hand, of promoting the politicisation of the EU. Main contributors to this debate have been Bartolini and Hix.[6] Hix contends that fostering politicisation – a process that he already perceives as ongoing – would increase the legitimacy of the EU. By furthering political competition at the EU level, citizens would be provided with policy alternatives and accountability would be enhanced. Bartolini, by contrast, discerns the politicisation of the EU as a risky endeavour that could lead to undesired consequences such as a spillover of debate concerning constitutional questions.

Seizing on this debate, Magnette and Papadopoulos argue that the positive effects and the risks predicted by Hix and Bartolini respectively, are undermined by the consensual nature of EU decision-making.[7] Other authors, especially Majone and Moracscik, contradict the need for and the benefit of fostering EU democracy.[8] With regard to the EU's alleged focus on regulative competences, the promotion of politicisation would threaten the Pareto efficiency of decisions taken at the EU level.

In a nutshell, the EU finds itself in a dilemma: the heterogonous nature of the EU requires adhering to the prevalence of consensus-based decision-making.[9] Simultaneously, the lack of input legitimacy is meant to be overcome by seeking methods of mobilisation, which, could however lead to unintended forms of politicisation. As a possible solution, Magnette and Papadopoulos, based on experiences in Switzerland, propose to complement the EU consensus-machinery with direct forms of civil participation. Elements of direct democracy would counterbalance and compensate for the lack of transparency and the limited impact of the electoral outcome on the formation of the EU's executive.[10]

[6] See for instance the two papers by Stefano Bartolini (Should the Union be 'Politicised'? Prospects and Risks) and Simon Hix (Why the EU need (Left-Right) Politics? Policy Reform and Accountability are Impossible without it) in Simon Hix and Stefano Bartolini, "Politics: The Right or the Wrong Sort of Medicine for the EU?", in *Notre Europe Policy Papers*, No. 19 (March 2006), http://www.delorsinstitute.eu/media/Policypaper19-en.pdf; Andreas Follesdal and Simon Hix, "Why There is a Democratic Deficit in the EU...", cit.

[7] Paul Magnette and Yannis Papadopoulos, "On the Politicization of the European Consociation: A Middle Way between Hix and Bartolini", in *European Governance Papers*, No. C-8-01 (31 January 2008), http://www.mzes.uni-mannheim.de/eurogov/pdf/egp-connex-C-08-01.pdf.

[8] See for instance Giandomenico Majone, "Europe's 'Democratic Deficit': The Question of Standards", in *European Law Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (March 1998), p. 5-28; Andrew Moravcsik, "In Defence of the 'Democratic Deficit': Reassessing Legitimacy in the European Union", in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (November 2002), p. 603-624, https://www.princeton.edu/~amoravcs/library/deficit.pdf.

[9] See in particular Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy. Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999, p. 33.

[10] Paul Magnette and Yannis Papadopoulos, "On the Politicization of the European Consociation...",

IAI WORKING PAPERS 16 | 09 - MARCH 2016 ISSN 2280-4331 | ISBN 978-88-98650-87-3

2. The implications of Spitzenkandidaten: Much ado about nothing?

By and large, the introduction of the Spitzenkandidaten was driven by two main intentions: first, to overcome the second-order characterisation of the European elections;[11] second, to sustainably assert the role of the EP against the Heads of State or Government and foster its role in the election procedure of the Commission President.

2.1 Elections without voters: The persistence of the second-order effects

The EP's competences have been increased with each treaty reform – in particular by introducing and extending the ordinary legislative procedure which puts the EP on an equal footing with the Council. Concretely, the amount of treaty articles which stipulate a substantial involvement of the EP in the EU decision-making has been increased. Notwithstanding this continuous empowerment of the EP, electoral turnout has decreased since the first direct elections in 1979 (see Figure 1).[12] The 2014 innovation was supposed to contribute to the mobilisation of voters and to strengthen the input legitimacy of the EP and of the EU polity in general, the need for which had been discussed politically and academically long before 2014.[13]

Analyses of the second-order nature of the European elections started with the first direct elections in 1979,[14] and have since been a prominent element of the academic and political debate.[15] Besides the traditional indicators of lower turnout than in national elections, the relative good performance of small and new parties and the losses of ruling parties, the overall focus in terms of content in the electoral campaign has been a typical feature of second-order elections. In spite of the attempt to personalise the campaign, to demonstrate a clear link between the ballot and the investiture of the Commission President, and to provide the electorate with

cit., p. 18-21.

[11] For the term, see Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt, "Nine Second-Order National Elections. A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results", in *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (March 1980), p. 3-44.

[12] Olivier Rozenberg, "L'influence du Parlement européen et l'indifférence de ses électeurs: une correlation fallacieuse?", in *Politique européenne*, No. 28 (2009/2), p. 7-36, http://dx.doi.org/10.3917/poeu.028.0007.

[13] See for instance Andreas Follesdal and Simon Hix, "Why There is a Democratic Deficit in the EU...", cit.; Simon Hix, "Executive Selection in the European Union: Does the Commission President Investiture Procedure Reduce the Democratic Deficit?", in *European Integration online Papers* (EIoP), Vol. 1, No. 21 (1997), http://ssrn.com/abstract=302714.

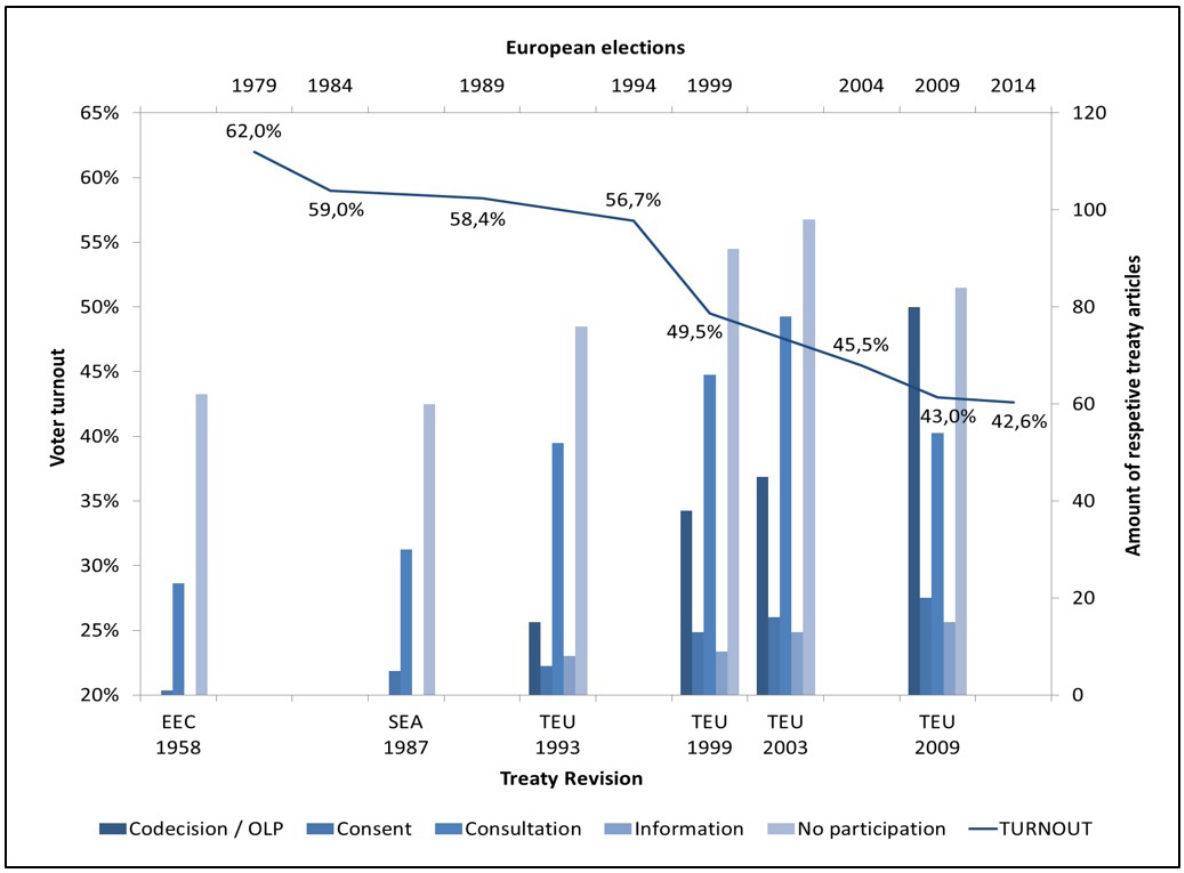
[14] Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt, "Nine Second-Order National Elections", cit., p. 3-44.

[15] See for instance Simon Hix and Michael Marsh, "Punishment or Protest? Understanding European Parliament Elections", in *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 69, No. 2 (May 2007), p. 495-510, http://personal.lse.ac.uk/hix/Working_Papers/Marsh-Hix-JOP2007.pdf; Simon Hix and Michael Marsh, "Second-Order Effects Plus Pan-European Political Swings: An Analysis of European Parliament Elections Across Time", in *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (March 2011), p. 4-15.

IAI WORKING PAPERS 16 | 09 - MARCH 2016 ISSN 2280-4331 | ISBN 978-88-98650-87-3

a real political choice between different alternatives, the general downtrend of the voter turnout continued in 2014. In some Member States, the turnout was higher than in 2009. Specifically, this was the case in Greece, Germany, Croatia, Lithuania and Sweden, where, nevertheless, the turnout was lower than in national elections.

Figure 1 | More competences – lower turnout



Source: Author's elaboration, based on studies by the Jean Monnet Chair of the University of Cologne.

Indeed, the existence of European front-runners could mobilise voters to a certain extent.[16] However, a large share of citizens was not aware of the existence of lead candidates, and only a minority knew the individual Spitzenkandidaten by name.[17] Additionally, the simultaneous holding of other elections was one aspect that "subsidized" the EP election turnout. This happened inter alia in Germany, where the turnout was higher in *Länder* in which local elections also took place. More importantly, the anti-EU movements were a main factor that contributed to the

[16] Hermann Schmitt, Sara B. Hobolt and Sebastian Adrian Popa, "Does Personalization Increase Turnout? Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 European Parliament Elections", in *European Union Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (September 2015), p. 347-368.

[17] Sara B. Hobolt, "A Vote for the President? The Role of Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 European Parliament Elections", in *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 21, No. 10 (2014), p. 1535-1537.

IAI WORKING PAPERS 16 | 09 - MARCH 2016 ISSN 2280-4331 | ISBN 978-88-98650-87-3

mobilisation of voters, specifically in the United Kingdom, France and Denmark.[18] With the introduction of lead candidates, a political element was injected to the EU polity. Instead of mobilising the electorate by politicising the electoral campaign in partisan terms, it contributed to the polarisation of the citizens' attitude towards EU integration.

> EU positive citizens applaud this development and evaluate the performance of EU democracy more positively than those who are more sceptical about the virtues of European integration and find themselves left out of the race of the lead candidates. Unfortunately, when viewed from the intended goals, the presence of lead candidates backfired, or at least had the unintended consequence of galvanising those voters who are generally opposed to integration.[19]

This polarisation coincided with an increased share of votes for EU-sceptic parties which certainly was not solely caused by the existence of Spitzenkandidaten.[20]

Additionally, persistent low turnouts raise doubts with regard to the legitimacy of the self-empowerment of the EP vis-à-vis the European Council, the members of which enjoy a relatively higher electoral basis than the EP.[21]

Moreover, the EP elections again served to send a warning message to the ruling parties. In 20 Member States, governing parties performed worse than in the last national elections.[22] Prominent examples are the French Socialists and the British Conservatives. In most countries, small parties received more votes than in the last national elections, in particular in the UK, Spain and Greece.[23] As indicated, the good results for EU-sceptic parties, which now have a larger share of seats in the EP, were particularly remarkable. Again France and the UK are notable examples, where the Front National and the United Kingdom Independence Party received more votes than any mainstream party.[24] Yet EU-sceptic parties did not perform as well as predicted across the board, for instance the Finns Party lost votes compared

[18] Ibid., p. 1536.

[19] Robert Rohrschneider, Hermann Schmitt and Sebastian Adrian Popa, *Polarizing without Politicizing: The Effect of Lead Candidates' Campaigns on Perceptions of the EU Democracy*, Paper presented at the EES2014 Conference, Mannheim, 6-8 November 2015, p. 20, http://eeshomepage.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Rohrschneider-Schmitt-and-Popa_Mannheim.pdf.

[20] For a detailed analysis, see for instance John FitzGibbon, "Euroscepticism and the 2014 European Parliamentary Elections", in *L'Europe en formation*, No. 373 (Autumn 2014), p. 29-44.

[21] See Michael Kaeding, "The Juncker Commission has Brussels in a State of Upheaval. One year on, nothing is the way it used to be", in *ÖGfE Policy Briefs*, No. 35a/2015 (6 November 2015), http://oegfe.at/wordpress/?p=4857.

[22] Hendrik Träger, "Die Europawahl 2014 als second-order election. Ein Blick in alle 28-Staaten", in Michael Kaeding and Niko Switek (eds.), *Die Europawahl 2014*, Wiesbaden, Springer Fachmedien, 2015, p. 39.

[23] Ibid.

[24] For further analyses of EU-sceptic parties in the 2014 elections, see for instance John FitzGibbon, "Euroscepticism and the 2014 European Parliamentary Elections", cit.

IAI WORKING PAPERS 16 | 09 - MARCH 2016 ISSN 2280-4331 | ISBN 978-88-98650-87-3

to the previous national elections.

Although in most Member States the dominant topics in the electoral campaign and debates were of national nature, European issues were of more relevance than in previous EP elections in some countries.[25] However, this can mostly be allocated to the salience of the ongoing economic crisis – rather than to the electoral innovation.[26]

The Spitzenkandidaten did not campaign in all countries. They only tried to win support for the respective national parties in Member States in which they were already known or in which gains were expected from their presence, inter alia due to the unpopularity of the national political leaders.[27] By contrast, some national parties deliberately prevented an involvement of their own European lead candidates in their campaigns fearing negative repercussions.[28] Likewise, the European political parties were hardly present in the run-up to the elections. Most national parties did not mention their European affiliation in their campaign material.[29]

2.2 Until further notice: A victory of the European Parliament

The second aim related to the Spitzenkandidaten innovation was particularly EP-centred. The EP sought to launch and fix a new *modus operandi* beyond the Treaty provisions, and thus, in the long term, for rebalancing the institutional architecture of the EU. Legally, the EP's involvement in the appointment of the Commission President had already been constantly increasing since the Treaties of Rome. Starting from the right to dismiss the High Authority, the EP's competences increased to the right of being consulted, of giving its assent and finally of electing the Commission President. In the course of this development, the Members of the EP adroitly over-interpreted their formal rights, for instance by introducing hearings of the designated Commission President and the further members of the European Commission.[30] With the election of Jean-Claude Juncker in 2014,

[25] Mirte van den Berge, "The 2014 EP Election Campaign in the Member States: National Debates, European Elections", in *TEPSA Reports*, 4 June 2014, p. 6, http://www.tepsa.eu/?p=7974.

[26] Sara B. Hobolt, "A Vote for the President?", cit., p. 1534; Rudolf Hrbek, "Europawahl 2014: Kontinuität und neue Facetten", in *Integration*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (2014), p. 205-227.

[27] Mirte van den Berge, "The 2014 EP Election Campaign in the Member States", cit., p. 6.

[28] Thomas Christiansen, "EU-Spitzenkandidaten – neue Impulse und ihre Folgen für das politische System der EU", in *Integration*, No. Vol. 38, No. 1 (2015), p. 32-33; Mirte van den Berge, "The 2014 EP Election Campaign in the Member States", cit., p. 6.

[29] Torsten Oppelland, "Zur Europäisierung der Europa-Wahlkämpfe nationaler Parteien", in Michael Kaeding and Niko Switek (eds.), *Die Europawahl 2014*, Wiesbaden, Springer Fachmedien, 2015, p. 131.

[30] See for instance Yvonne M. Nasshoven, *The Appointment of the President of the European Commission. Patterns in Choosing the Head of Europe's Executive*, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2011; Andreas Maurer and Wolfgang Wessels, *Das Europäische Parlament nach Amsterdam und Nizza: Akteur, Arena oder Alibi?*, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2003; Thomas Christiansen, "EU-

IAI WORKING PAPERS 16 | 09 - MARCH 2016 ISSN 2280-4331 | ISBN 978-88-98650-87-3

the EP at first sight again acted strategically securing itself a strong position in future elections of Commission Presidents. This new method also fostered the link between the Commission and the EP[31] – however without generally detaching the Commission from the European Council and making the Commission President an agent of the EP.[32]

With regard to the Commission and its President, preliminary observations indicate a new activism since their investiture. Juncker started his office term by re-organising the internal structure of the Commission. He created project teams within his college and enhanced the status of his vice-presidents. The Commission President himself seems to have assumed a more pronounced leading role within the Commission. This current tendency could imply a further renunciation of the traditional mantra of the Commission President as a *primus inter pares*.

More importantly, Juncker appears to be making a point of clarifying his role and that of the Commission in the EU decision-making. The investment plan and the refugee relocation mechanism, which were put forward to overcome the economic and refugee crises, are two major examples which illustrate the Commission's attempt to regain and to foster its position among the EU institutions by actively launching political projects instead of acting as a simple secretariat. For the moment, it is, however, unclear whether Juncker's initiatives are due to his personal commitment or to the Commission President's new basis of legitimacy.

Additionally, although the Spitzenkandidaten could not politicise the electoral campaign in partisan terms, some academics identify a certain politicisation of the European Commission as a result of the electoral innovation.[33] It remains to be seen to what extent these preliminary observations can be verified, and how a potentially more political – or even politicised – Commission is perceived by the general public and how other actors react to that. Demands to withdraw competencies from the Commission in areas in which technocratic neutrality is necessary have already been put on the table.[34] Indeed, a politicisation of the EU's main executive could jeopardise the institution's original *raison d'être* as a neutral

Spitzenkandidaten", cit.

[31] Johannes Müller Gómez and Wolfgang Wessels, "The EP Elections 2014 and their Consequences. A Further Step towards EU Parliamentarism?", in *Cuadernos Europeos de Deusto*, No. 52 (2015), p. 39-66; Thomas Christiansen, "EU-Spitzenkandidaten", cit., p. 40-42; Michael Kaeding, "The Juncker Commission has Brussels in a State of Upheaval", cit.

[32] Johannes Müller Gómez and Wolfgang Wessels, "The EP Elections 2014 and their Consequences", cit.

[33] See for instance Nicolai von Ondarza, "Struktur- und Kulturwandel in Brüssel", in *SWP-Aktuell*, No. 65 (October 2014), http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/aktuell/2014A65_orz.pdf; Charles de Marcilly, "The Juncker Commission, the return of politics?", in *European Issues*, No. 330 (27 October 2014), http://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/0330-the-juncker-commission-back-to-politics; Michael Kaeding, "The Juncker Commission has Brussels in a State of Upheaval", cit.

[34] Nicolai von Ondarza, "Struktur- und Kulturwandel in Brüssel", cit., p. 4; Werner Mussler, "Schäuble will EU-Kommission entmachten", in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Online*, 29 July 2015, http://www.faz.net/-gqu-866sz.

IAI WORKING PAPERS 16 | 09 - MARCH 2016 ISSN 2280-4331 | ISBN 978-88-98650-87-3

body.

Despite the defeat by the EP in the nomination of Juncker and the currently apparent eagerness of the Commission President, the European Council will remain a key player in the EU system.[35] Overall, the European Council has continued to shape the agenda and policy-making of the Union by providing the respective impetus and guidelines – generally limiting the Commission's agenda-setting prerogatives – and interfering in EU decision-making if necessary.[36] The adoption of the so-called Strategic Agenda, in which the national leaders determined "five overarching priorities which will guide the work of the European Union over the next five years,"[37] in the aftermath of the 2014 elections is an early indication of the institution's constant commitment.[38]

Although the Spitzenkandidaten concept has not generally challenged the EU's overall institutional architecture, the future development of the Commission and its relationship to the EP remain on the research agenda.

3. Lessons learned: 2014 preparing for 2019?

The developments before the elections 2014 were informed by both uncertainty and heterogeneity.[39] The appointment procedures within the European parties differed considerably. Whereas some applied creative and well-elaborated proceedings, other European parties deliberately did not nominate candidates and refused to participate in the experiment. Prior to the summer of 2014, it was not sure whether the European Council would accept the limitation of its prerogatives. This uncertainty also contributed to the lack of potential candidates and the fact that many lead candidates were only nominated very late. These patterns are likely to change now the procedure is established.

3.1 Some progress: A few new incentives being set

2014 set incentives that will shape the respective actors' conduct in the run-up to the 2019 elections. National parties and Heads of State or Government are now "aware of [the European parties'] newly acquired power to pre-determine the circle of potential candidates from which the European Council must choose future

[35] Wolfgang Wessels, The European Council, cit.

[36] Ibid., p. 69-75.

[37] European Council, *Conclusions, Brussels, 26-27 June 2014* (EUCO 79/14), p. 14, http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-79-2014-INIT/en/pdf.

[38] Johannes Müller Gómez and Wolfgang Wessels, "The EP Elections 2014 and their Consequences", cit., p. 61.

[39] Oliver Höing and Johannes Müller Gómez, "Towards the German Model? Spitzenkandidaten and European Elections 2014", in *L'Europe en formation*, No. 373 (Autumn 2014), p. 45-65.

IAI WORKING PAPERS 16 | 09 - MARCH 2016 ISSN 2280-4331 | ISBN 978-88-98650-87-3

Commission Presidents."[40] Based on rational-choice institutionalist approaches,[41] we expect the involved actors to react strategically to this new institutional context.

First, in 2014, pro-Spitzenkandidaten MEPs who were not politically affiliated to Juncker and fought the electoral campaign with a rival candidate, voted him into office in order to successfully impose the new procedure. For instance, several green MEPs voted for Juncker although their European political group was not part of the agreement of the three main parliamentary groups to support the conservative candidate.[42] Such institutional motivation might be less present in 2019.[43]

Second, running for the post of the Commission President has become more attractive. In 2019, high level politicians might have more incentives and less fear of leaving the national arena and standing for Commission President. Experienced candidates could further professionalise the nomination procedure and electoral campaign, and contribute to increased public attention.

Third, political parties and leaders that did not actively participate in the Spitzenkandidaten experiment in 2014 might rethink their strategy. On the one hand, European parties which did not nominate lead candidates in 2014 might feel compelled to do so in 2019 in order to not be excluded from the electoral debates. Besides, this new incentive might also lead to the foundation of new European parties.[44] On the other hand, national parties will intensify their commitments within the European political parties in order to be able to influence the Spitzenkandidaten selections in 2018 or 2019. In particular, the Heads of State or Government, who are also influential leaders of their national parties, will seek to influence the pre-selection of the candidates for the post of the Commission President.[45] After the EP's victory over the European Council in 2014, they will get involved at an earlier stage of the appointment procedure.

[40] Ibid., p. 56.

[41] Kenneth A. Shepsle, "Institutional Arrangements and Equilibrium in Multidimensional Voting Models", in *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (February 1979), p. 27-59; Kenneth A. Shepsle, "Studying Institutions: Some Lessons from the Rational Choice Approach", in *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (April 1989), p. 131-147.

[42] ALDE, *EPP, S&D and ALDE to form a stable majority in the EP for the next European Commission*, 26 June 2014, http://www.alde.eu/nc/press/press-and-release-news/press-release/article/epp-sd-and-alde-to-form-a-stable-majority-in-the-ep-for-the-next-european-commission-43155.

[43] Oliver Höing and Johannes Müller Gómez, "Towards the German Model?", cit., p. 56.

[44] The fact that, in the aftermath of the EP elections in 2014, the EU-sceptic Alliance for Direct Democracy in Europe and the Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedom (which in particular comprise the United Kingdom Independence Party and the French Front National, respectively) were constituted underpins this thesis.

[45] Johannes Müller Gómez and Wolfgang Wessels, "The EP Elections 2014 and their Consequences", cit., p. 56.

IAI WORKING PAPERS 16 | 09 - MARCH 2016 ISSN 2280-4331 | ISBN 978-88-98650-87-3

3.2 A realistic view: Limitations of further developments

Despite the likelihood of these developments, there are several uncertain factors that have to be taken into account. There is no guarantee that the events of 2014 will reoccur in 2019.

In order to be elected Commission President, the Spitzenkandidat has to receive the consent of 376 MEPs (Art. 17(7) TEU). There is no guarantee that this threshold will be reached. This might be more difficult in 2019 than in 2014 with MEPs now having fewer of the incentives to vote a rival candidate into office described above. Moreover, a larger share of EU-sceptic MEPs could complicate the formation of a necessary coalition even further. This would play into the hands of the European Council which could regain its supposedly lost prerogative.

The European Council has always considered the investiture of the European Commission and particularly of its President as highly relevant.[46] It still holds the formal right to propose the President of the Commission. It will not re-select a candidate that did not take into account national interests.[47] Beyond that, the further increase of EU-sceptic movements might lead to the European Council not reaching the required qualified majority in 2019. The appointment of the victorious Spitzenkandidat would be blocked, which would lead to ponderous inter-institutional negotiations.

Moreover, after the appointment of Juncker, the Heads of State or Government declared that they would re-consider the appointment procedure of the Commission President with regard to future elections. The actual implications of this announcement remain to be seen.

> Once the new European Commission is effectively in place, the European Council will consider the process for the appointment of the President of the European Commission for the future, respecting the European Treaties.[48]

Besides the uncertain behaviour of the European Council, there are institutional arrangements and incentives which prevent further developments.

The persisting second-order quality of the elections can be attributed to various circumstances that will remain unchanged in 2019. In particular, national parties do not have sufficiently strong incentives to Europeanise their electoral campaigns. The European elections conveniently serve as test or midterm elections. National parties are provided with the opportunity to, for instance, question the national

[46] Yvonne M. Nasshoven, *The Appointment of the President of the European Commission*, cit.; Wolfgang Wessels, *The European Council*, cit., p. 75-80.

[47] Johannes Müller Gómez and Wolfgang Wessels, "The EP Elections 2014 and their Consequences", cit., p. 61.

[48] European Council, *Conclusions, Brussels, 26-27 June 2014*, cit., par. 27.

IAI WORKING PAPERS 16 | 09 - MARCH 2016 ISSN 2280-4331 | ISBN 978-88-98650-87-3

government and prepare for the next national elections.[49] More importantly, national parties still have the incentive to bring in national topics and popular national politicians instead of the "distant" EU matters and staff in order to mobilise their voters. The example of Martin Schulz, who underlined in Germany that voting for him was the only chance to have a German Commission President, clearly indicates that even committed European candidates cannot resist the incentive to campaign nationally.

Furthermore, the existing institutional structures represent strong obstacles, in particular, regarding the aim of providing the electorate with a real choice and thus fostering the accountability mechanisms. Although the Commission President is now appointed and elected on the basis of the electoral outcome, we do not share the assessment that this has decisively increased the accountability of the President of the Commission vis-à-vis the EU citizens.[50]

Due to the enduring need to compromise in the persistently consensual EU decision-making processes, citizens are not easily able to assess which actor is responsible for what. The EP is dominated by broad coalitions. It still lacks a clear division between a fixed coalition and an opposition although the new procedure produced the first incentives to form such parliamentary camps.[51] Besides the 2014 electoral results with an increased share of EU-sceptic MEPs, which forces the mainstream political groups to cooperate more closely,[52] large coalitions are caused by legal provisions: partly, high thresholds are required in the EP – concretely the need to reach 376 votes in specific phases of the ordinary legislative procedure (Art. 294 TFEU) and in other significant decisions.[53] Likewise, since the EP has to co-legislate with the Council, within which high thresholds also apply, it has the incentive to reach a strong position, i.e. a large parliamentary coalition.[54] Since the beginning of the current legislative term, in well over 50 percent of the roll-call votes held, all political groups in the EP, except for the strongly EU-sceptic "Europe of Nations and Freedoms" and "Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy" groups, have voted together.[55] Spitzenkandidaten and the European parties are aware of the necessity to reach compromises with other political groups and the Council. As a result, they have avoided clear, detailed and specific positions during the electoral

[49] Simon Hix, "Executive Selection in the European Union", cit.

[50] See for instance Martin Schulz, "Das neue, demokratische Europa", in Michael Kaeding and Niko Switek (eds.), *Die Europawahl 2014*, Wiesbaden, Springer Fachmedien, 2015, p. 11-14.

[51] Johannes Müller Gómez and Wolfgang Wessels, "The EP Elections 2014 and their Consequences", cit.

[52] Oliver Höing and Johannes Müller Gómez, "Towards the German Model?", cit., p. 60-63.

[53] Olivier Rozenberg, "L'influence du Parlement européen et l'indifférence de ses électeurs", cit., p. 16.

[54] See Andreas Maurer, "Die Kreationsfunktion des Europäischen Parlaments im Spannungsfeld zwischen Politisierungsimpulsen und Systemerfordernissen", in *Zeitschrift für Politik*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (2014), p. 301-326; Olivier Rozenberg, "L'influence du Parlement européen et l'indifférence de ses électeurs", cit., p. 15.

[55] VoteWatchEurope, http://www.votewatch.eu.

IAI WORKING PAPERS 16 | 09 - MARCH 2016 ISSN 2280-4331 | ISBN 978-88-98650-87-3

campaigns.[56]

Voters still elect national parties, which later gather in the EP to form European political groups. This step is unknown in elections at the national level, at which parties and parliamentary groups regularly match. European political groups, although increasingly coherent,[57] can still not be considered as unitary entities. The composition and size of the parliamentary groups do not directly result from the electoral outcome but from negotiations among national parties.[58] With the chain of delegation remaining interrupted, the election of the Commission President is not straightforward.

4. Recommendations: (How) can the Spitzenkandidaten concept be improved?

Based on the shortcomings in 2014, the persisting limitations and the theoretical considerations, we plead for future reforms focusing on four overall objectives: first, the electoral campaigns should be more honest, i.e. the elections should be fought with the topics that actually are at stake. Second, responsiveness should be strengthened, i.e. European citizens should not only be represented at the EU level but also feel represented. Third, solutions to be implemented should preserve the compromise-seeking nature of the EU. Fourth, as a major lesson learned from 2014, debates on potential reforms have to take into account the risks of further politicisation and polarisation.

It should be noted that an amendment of the European Election Act of 1976 might imply not only legislative but also constitutional amendments in the Member States,[59] which sets relatively high hurdles for a reform. Most current proposals face this challenge.

4.1 Transnational lists: Towards EU parliamentarism

A recurrent idea in the academic and political debate is the introduction of transnational lists.[60] Transnational lists could be introduced either comprehensively

[56] Thomas Christiansen, "EU-Spitzenkandidaten", cit., p. 36-37.

[57] Gail McElroy, "Committees and Party Cohesion in the European Parliament", in *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (2008), p. 357-373, https://oezp.univie.ac.at/index.php/zfp/article/view/733.

[58] Oliver Höing and Johannes Müller Gómez, "Towards the German Model?", cit.

[59] Monika Nogaj and Eva-Maria Poptcheva, "The Reform of the Electoral Law of the European Union. European Added Value Assessment accompanying the legislative own-initiative Report", in *European Parliamentary Research Service Blog*, 30 September 2015, http://wp.me/p2qdgs-51I.

[60] See for instance Jo Leinen and Fabian Pescher, "Von Parteienbündnissen zu ‚echten Parteien' auf europäischer Ebene? Hintergrund, Gegenstand und Folgen der neuen Regeln für Europäische Parteien", in *Integration*, vol. 37, No. 3 (2014), p. 228-246.

IAI WORKING PAPERS 16 | 09 - MARCH 2016 ISSN 2280-4331 | ISBN 978-88-98650-87-3

by abolishing the current regional and national lists, or additionally by complementing the current system of fixed national contingents in the EP. The former proposal would require a Treaty revision.[61]

In November 2015, the EP adopted with a tight majority of 52 percent an own-initiative report proposing amendments of the European Election Act of 1976.[62] The report by Jo Leinen and Danuta Maria Hübner aims at fostering European citizenship and making the elections more European.[63] Besides several technical aspects – of which we support the obligatory placement of the European parties on the ballot papers in order to make the link to the European Spitzenkandidaten more prominent – it concretely stipulates the nomination of European Spitzenkandidaten by European political parties and invites the Council to create a European constituency. In this joint constituency, the party lists would be headed by the European lead candidates.

Transnational lists would at first sight be more democratic than the current system of degressive proportionality by introducing the "one person-one vote" principle. However it would certainly not generally be perceived as more legitimate. In order to secure an appropriate representation of citizens of smaller Member States, the introduction of national quotas within the transnational party lists would be necessary as compensation.

An electoral system only consisting of transnational lists would decisively impact the European party system and foster the parliamentary nature of the EU concerning the inner working of the EP. With the parliamentary groups and the European political parties matching, the parliamentary groups' cohesion would increase, a real division between a parliamentary coalition and opposition might emerge and the chain of delegation between decision-makers and citizens would be improved. Whereas the coalition would elect the Commission, which would be closely linked to the parliamentary majority, the parliamentary minority would be mostly excluded from EU decision-making and be responsible for controlling the Commission (see Figure 2).

[61] A model adding transnational lists to the current system was proposed by Andrew Duff (EP rapporteur) in 2011 and the Future of Europe Group in 2012. The EP Committee on Constitutional Affairs envisaged a Treaty amendment adding 25 MEPs who should be elected by one single constituency formed of the whole Union's territory. The EP plenary did not however approve the report. See European Parliament, *Report on a proposal for a modification of the Act concerning the election of the Members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage of 20 September 1976* (A7-0176/2011), 28 April 2011, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=REPORT&reference=A7-2011-0176&language=EN; Future of Europe Group, *Final Report*, cit.

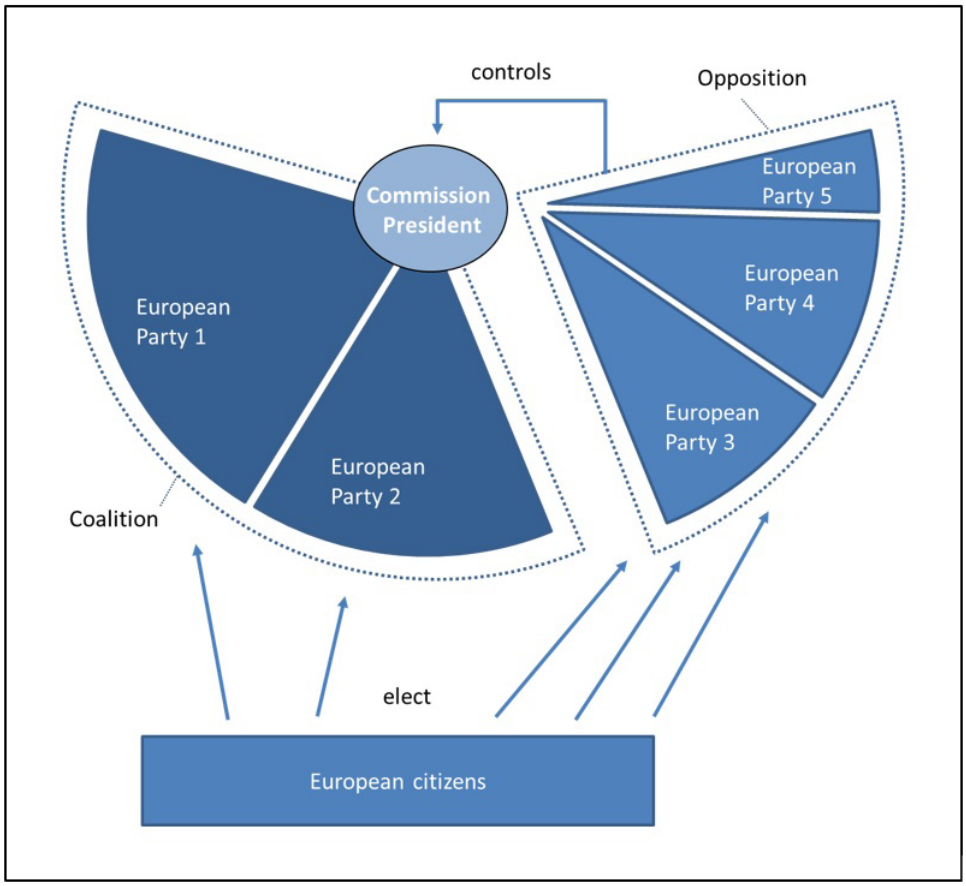
[62] European Parliament, *Resolution on the reform of the electoral law of the European Union* (P8_TA(2015)0395), 11 November 2015, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P8-TA-2015-0395&language=EN.

[63] For an analysis of the draft report, see also Monika Nogaj and Eva-Maria Poptcheva, "The Reform of the Electoral Law of the European Union", cit., p. 30.

IAI WORKING PAPERS 16 | 09 - MARCH 2016 ISSN 2280-4331 | ISBN 978-88-98650-87-3

As proposed by the EP's resolution, the European lead candidates would appear at the top of ballot papers making the link between a vote and the choice for a future Commission President obvious.

Figure 2 | EU Parliamentarism resulting from transnational voting lists



Source: Author's elaboration.

With the European parties being in charge of the organisation of the electoral campaign, on the one hand, topics and politicians involved in the electoral debates would most likely be more European than today. On the other hand, national parties would disappear to a large extent. Such a watershed would make the procedure incomprehensible and distant to the electorate who then would have to get used to the European party system, which would most likely result in a lower turnout.[64] It is doubtful whether such a reform would actually improve the responsiveness of the EU. This model opposes the argument that the EU should seek a system which shortens the link between voters and the political decision-makers.[65]

[64] See Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt, "Nine Second-Order National Elections", cit., p. 13.

[65] For this recommendation, see Simon Hix and Sara Hagemann, "Could Changing the Electoral Rules Fix European Parliament Elections?", in *Politique européenne*, No. 28 (2009/2), p. 37-52.

IAI WORKING PAPERS 16 | 09 - MARCH 2016 ISSN 2280-4331 | ISBN 978-88-98650-87-3

Furthermore, a parliamentarisation process would run counter to the aim of preserving a decision-making procedure based on comprehensive compromises. It would enhance a majoritarian tendency by merging the Parliament(ary coalition) and the Commission. An amalgamation of the EP and Commission would lead to the elimination of one veto-player in the EU's institutional architecture (see Figure 3).[66] Further undesirable polarisation might be the result.

4.2 Direct election of the Commission President: Towards a responsive presidentialism

Alternatively to fostering the parliamentary dimension, presidential systems could serve as a blueprint. Based on the presidential model, the Commission President would be directly elected by and, as a consequence, directly accountable to the citizens. This is one of the most far-reaching proposals among the discussed Treaty reforms and was also discussed by the Future of Europe Group.[67] Such a presidentialisation of the EU system would go beyond the classical lead candidates concept by introducing a second European election that would be strongly personalised. It would establish a direct chain of delegation and provide citizens with clear voting options, for instance the choice of rejecting or confirming a sitting Commission President. This would in general terms enhance the EU's responsiveness.

Furthermore, with the electoral campaign being carried out by the pan-European candidates (jointly with the respective European parties), the debates in the run-up to the presidential elections would be informed by European instead of national issues. The electoral campaigns in the framework of the EP elections would, however, remain unchanged.

Similarly to the concept of transnational lists, a classical direct election of the Commission President – based on the "one person-one vote" principle – would imply an insignificant role for small Member States. In order to counteract a marginalisation of sparsely-populated countries, an adaptation to, for instance, the US model with degressively proportionally distributed Electors would be necessary.

Such a reform would introduce a purely majoritarian element to the EU. Still, in contrast to recommendations demanding a further parliamentarisation of the EU, this presidential model would not challenge the EU's consensus-seeking nature and its well-developed system of checks and balances, which might seem counter-

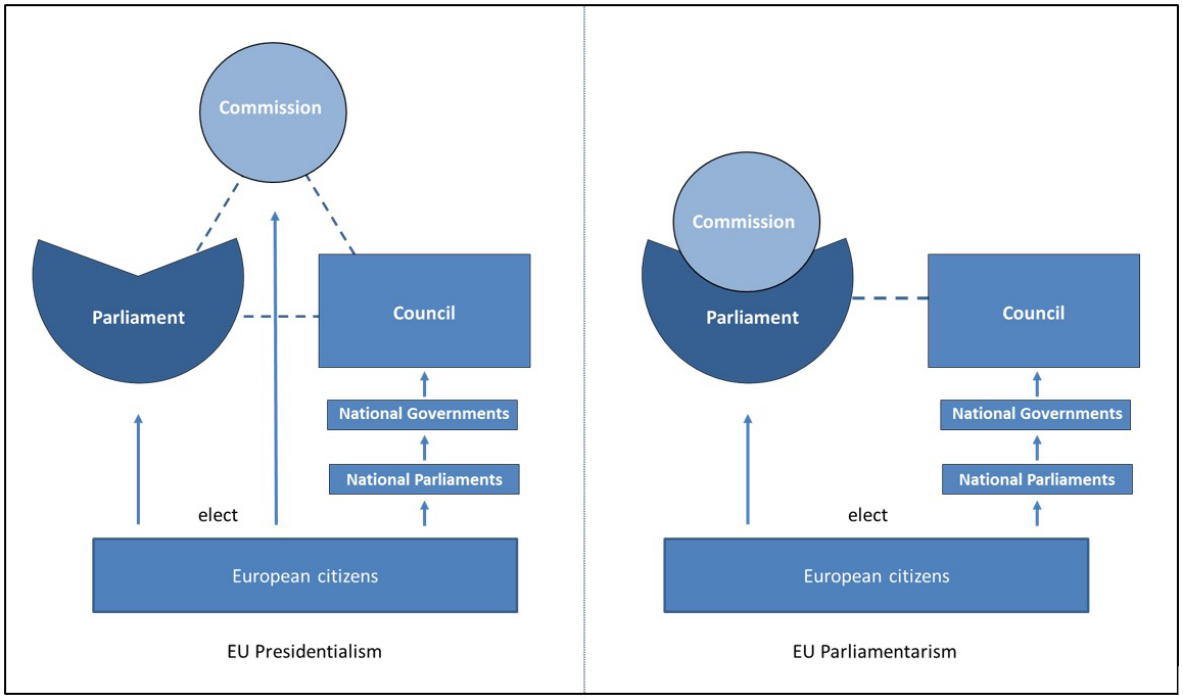
[66] Frank Decker and Jared Sonnicksen, "An Alternative to European Union Democratization: Re-Examining the Direct Election of the Commission President", in *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (April 2011), p. 168-191.

[67] Future of Europe Group, *Final Report*, cit. For further academic analysis and discussion see Simon Hix, "Executive Selection in the European Union", cit.; Frank Decker and Jared Sonnicksen, "An Alternative to European Union Democratization", cit.

IAI WORKING PAPERS 16 | 09 - MARCH 2016 ISSN 2280-4331 | ISBN 978-88-98650-87-3

intuitive at first sight.[68] Being directly elected, the President of the European Commission would gain independence from the other EU institutions. By contrast, in a parliamentary model, the Commission would be closely linked to or even merged with the parliament(ary majority). As a result, a parliamentarised EU would have one veto-player less than in the presidential scenario (see Figure 3).[69]

Figure 3 | EU presidentialism and EU parliamentarism



Source: Author's elaboration.

On the other hand, a direct election of the President of the European Commission might enhance polarisation, the repercussions of which are hardly foreseeable. Moreover, the Commission would be further politicised. Consequently, tasks for which political neutrality is of high relevance would have to be outsourced to executive agencies.

4.3 European primaries: Learning from the US, raising more awareness

A last idea to be discussed is the further development of the nomination procedure of the pan-European candidates, which would not necessarily require legal modifications but an adaptation of the parties' statutes. In order to broaden the awareness of the existence and benefit of Spitzenkandidaten, the intra-party procedures could follow the model of the United States of America, where the

[68] Frank Decker and Jared Sonnicksen, "An Alternative to European Union Democratization", cit.
[69] Ibid.

ISSN 2280-4331 | ISBN 978-88-98650-87-3

nominations of candidates for the US President are not based on opaque votes of the party conferences.

European parties would hold primaries in all Member States.[70] They could be organised either as an open or a closed procedure, i.e. all citizens entitled to vote, or only party sympathisers or members could participate in the candidate selection. Whereas the effect of the former would certainly be higher, it is unlikely that national party elites would give up their candidate selection competency to such a large extent in the short term. Each Member State would be allocated a weighted vote based on its population or the amount of the respective national party members. Contenders for the Spitzenkandidaten posts would be encouraged to present themselves in each Member State trying to gain support for their application. Such nomination procedures would enhance transparency, might increase media attention and, by involving citizens or at least party members, further their awareness. The participation of citizens at an early stage of the electoral process could also contribute to an increase in the turnout at the actual EP elections. Since the potential Spitzenkandidaten would have to convince citizens/party members all over the EU, their campaigns would of necessity be of European nature. In addition, it would force the candidates to be more responsive to public concerns.

The Heads of State or Government as national party leaders have been (partly influentially) involved at the European party conferences. The holding of primary elections would reduce their influence by transferring the right to nominate the Spitzenkandidaten to party members, sympathisers or citizens. Such a direct legitimatisation of the lead candidates would make it impossible for the members of the European Council not to nominate the winning Spitzenkandidat as Commission President.

Such a procedure might promote politicisation. Since we are only talking about primary elections and not the election of the Commission President itself, polarising effects would be limited and would not increase compared to 2014. Whereas the primaries would be Europeanised, the nature of the actual EP electoral campaign, which would still be carried out by the national parties, would most likely remain national. Such a modification of the Spitzenkandidaten nomination procedure would represent a small but fruitful complement of direct civil involvement to the consensus-informed EU structure. This proposal, thus, fits the considerations elaborated by Magnette and Papadopoulos.

[70] In contrast to the primary elections organised by the European Green Party in 2013-2014, we advise against holding the candidate selections in a pan-European manner in order to prevent the marginalisation of citizens of small Member States.

IAI WORKING PAPERS 16 | 09 - MARCH 2016 ISSN 2280-4331 | ISBN 978-88-98650-87-3

Conclusion: Comprehensively satisfying solutions remain to be invented

The Spitzenkandidaten procedure can be considered as a first step to surmount the insufficient democratic control at the EU level. The EP succeeded securing itself a stronger position in the investiture procedure of the Commission President – at the expense of the European Council. On the other hand, the second-order nature of the European elections could not be overcome. What is more, the precedent arguably contributed to the polarisation of citizens' attitudes towards EU integration.

Although further developments and improvements are expected for 2019, they are limited by institutional arrangements and incentives, which go far beyond the electoral process itself. At the same time, one has to be aware of the risks of polarisation in the EU and reflect on the actual need for and benefit of attempts to politicise the EU system, which could spill over into protest at EU integration in general.

Future steps should aim to improve the EU's responsiveness and make the elections more European, without questioning the Union's consensual character and furthering polarisation.

Table 1 | Benefits and drawbacks of potential reforms

Aim / Reform	Europeanisation of electoral campaign	Enhancing responsiveness	Respecting consensus-based nature	Avoiding risks of politicisation/ polarisation
Transnational lists	+	-	-	-
Direct election of Commission President	+	+	+	-
Primaries	-	+	+	+

Source: Own compilation.
Note: + = positive implications, - = negative or no implications with regard to the four formulated objectives.

We discussed three possible models, none of which present a perfect solution (see Table 1). The holding of European primaries would raise awareness of the Spitzenkandidaten by involving citizens or party members at an early stage of the electoral process. The effects on the electoral campaigns might be limited. Transnational lists, by contrast, would Europeanise the run-up to the EP elections. They might, however, not contribute to the responsiveness of the EU and threaten the EU's consensual functioning. The direct election of the Commission President would combine an increase of accountability with the maintenance – or even the strengthening – of the EU's consensus-machinery. Against the backdrop of the risks of polarisation, it might be reasonable to take small, safe steps. European

IAI WORKING PAPERS 16 | 09 - MARCH 2016 ISSN 2280-4331 | ISBN 978-88-98650-87-3

primaries would not challenge the compromise-based decision-making at the EU level and not necessarily require Treaty amendments or the adoption of secondary law. If the holding of primaries proves itself and further polarising effects can be ruled out, the presidentialisation of the EU could be taken into consideration as the final step of refinement of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure.

Updated 11 March 2016

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