

THE GREAT COUNTDOWN: A GUIDE ON HOW TO ARRIVE PREPARED FOR THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS 2029

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FOREWORD

THE GREAT COUNTDOWN: A GUIDE ON BEING PREPARED FOR THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS 2029

Ania Skrzypek

2024 was a year of great expectations. It was estimated that half of the world's population would be able to cast votes in diverse elections, including European ones. These are always awaited with much anticipation, and they are consecutively announced to be the momentum for altering the trajectory of European integration. But then, after what is usually a short campaign, the new parliament is elected, the negotiations for the top (and other) positions are concluded and the work plan is set – seeing all cogs move into place and leaving little space for digesting the experience of the actual vote. What seems to matter more, for legitimate and strategically relevant reasons, is what comes next and how to live up to expectations of the moment. From this perspective, the horizon of subsequent elections, which are five years away, seems to be very far off indeed.

This is, however, a great pity and a certain loss, not only because the elections are meant to be the greatest celebratory moment of participatory democracy. Hence, one could argue that, despite all the criticism regarding the diverse EU deficits and shortcomings, the European ones – in a very peculiar way – are as well. The elections may not be what was hoped for when they were introduced and conducted for the first time in 1979. But still, they create momentum, prompt mobilisation, and offer a somewhat more direct connection between the individuals living in Europe and the institution that is to represent them. And that should call for honouring the elections with a longer evaluation to look at the lessons learned. Instead, it is rather perplexing that, vote after vote, there is a growing sense of disenchantment among the stakeholders involved – who point to deficien-

cies, promises never to repeat the same mistakes and yet let the conversation drop far too early for it to remain instructive for the future. Then, by the time the next elections are approaching, it seems too late to change anything profoundly – since any reform inside of the EU needs time and space for constructive compromises – and the mechanisms that define the dynamics remain almost the same.

This observation inspired the FEPS and FES Brussels project, under the title *“Living up to, not leaving aside”*, which was initiated to capture pre- and post-electoral conversations. The summaries of expert debates (including four round tables with politicians, academics, civil society organisations and youth representatives), innovative research inputs and the first-hand obtained empirical material have been duly collected over the course of 18 months. All this resulted in a policy study, *“Ahead of the 2029 European elections. Note to ourselves”*, by Ania Skrzypek and Kido Koenig (December 2023, updated in November 2024); a repository of instructive films featuring members of the European Parliament (EP), Katarina Barley, Brando Benifei, Gabi Bischoff, Juan Fernando López Aguilar and Andreas Schieder; and this fascinating compendium of research papers. Altogether they represent diverse points of view, united in the motivation to bring forward a much-awaited change to the rules of the campaign and EP elections.

Turning to the next pages, the readers will find, firstly, a pioneering study by Anna Paczesniak, who examined the role of European manifestoes. She took the documents from this most recent electoral campaign to her workshop, looking at the meth-

ologies that the europarties applied to draft and adopt their respective electoral programmes. Then, she dived into the content, which, in a captivating manner, is illustrated in a set of word clouds, pointing to that very relevant question of what the aim of such a document is, should be and who – in fact – remains its addressee. To that end, the chapter offers a set of incredibly useful observations about what could make manifestoes more relevant internally and externally, as well as what kind of opportunities there may be in the new type of negotiations around the European Commission (and portfolios within it) and its work plan. As such, it is a voice in favour of the claim that ideologies still matter, and an important input into how to restore the credibility and legitimacy of politics.

While the task of crafting the right message is at the core of the pre-electoral strategy, it must be followed by a decision on how and with whose engagement to disseminate it. This is where the question of the role of europarties and sister parties, on one hand, and the role of the national lists versus the mission to be fulfilled by a so-called Spitzenkandidate comes into the spotlight. Consequently, the next chapter features a paper by Julian Plottka, who remained sceptical about the impact of the institution of the top candidate until now. He argues that it has had rather limited impact when it comes to overcoming the EU democratic deficit, failing to help forge a new connection between EU-level politics and its citizens. However, though the experiences have not been the most encouraging, Plottka believes that these are just rough beginnings and that, with some adjustments, progress could still be achieved. This would be especially true if all the Spitzenkandidates remained committed and it were compulsory for the europarties to nominate them, if they were to be accompanied by the introduction of transnational lists, and if all of this were done with a clear strategy of what roles they would play in the post-electoral negotiations. Defining these clearly at the beginning is a question of showcasing commitment to transparency as well.

The conviction that the Spitzenkandidates are an important innovation, although not free of chal-

lenges, is shared by Wouter Wolfs. He looks at the historical perspective, showcasing that – however much disappointment there may have been in 2019 and 2024 in particular – the system is, in fact, consolidating, and there are important developments that it brings, which for far too long seem to have been disregarded. Among them is the role that the europarties started to play, having to define the procedures to (s)elect such candidates, support their campaign and stand by them in the electoral aftermath. This brought a greater degree of coordination within the political families and, to some extent, also prompted thinking about internal democracy and, by default, imposed some further Europeanisation of the EP campaign. Wolfs would like to see, however, further steps, indicating several of them in the paper's recommendations. He admits, however, that the key to unlocking the full potential is correlated with the reform of electoral law and that seems to be at a standstill.

Indeed, the authors of the contributions share the view that the deliberations about what to do with the lessons from past EP elections and how to translate them into innovative ideas are, in fact, about responding to both the perpetual democratic deficit of the EU and the contemporary crisis of democracy. They seek to identify ways in which the co-related challenges could be addressed and effectively overcome, and this leads Alvaro Oleart to ponder what kind of reflections one can have by comparing the experiences of the Conference on the Future of Europe and the European elections. The legacy of the first one is undisputable, though perhaps a truly quickly forgotten one – which should serve as a caution. To begin with, an argument should be made about organising spaces for engagement and then instrumentalising civil society mobilisations because what has been presented as a great opportunity was diminished to momentum for building legitimacy for the conservative-dominated Commission. To that end, Oleart cautions but also helps draw important lessons that can help progressives, especially in the new complex context and ahead of 2029, in creating pan-European deliberative spaces and meaningful, consistent alliances for change.

The collection's final piece is by Domenèc Ruiz Devesa and is a unique testimony of the first-hand experience of negotiations around the reform of EU electoral law. Equipped with an in-depth understanding of various arguments, Ruiz Devesa provides a compendium of ways in which the europarties can champion solutions while awaiting a new compromise, on one hand, and on the other, what they should see as absolute priorities and definitive no gos when the conversation about unifying the electoral code and the introduction of pan-European transnational lists resumes one day.

All in all, this particular volume offers critical insights, while also being an anthology of ways in which progressives and their europarties can succeed in reforming and improving the mechanisms of participatory democracy in Europe. The extraordinary lineup of outstanding scholars and experts whose pieces feature here guarantees that what has been included is not only plausible but also perfectly possible to realise. The question of when and how is herewith left to the decisionmakers, who undoubtedly should not be discouraged by the pitfalls, shortcomings and disappointments that have occurred. Instead, they should persevere – pushing the borders of their political, institutional and organisational imagination. The challenge they face will not only be about the mechanics of the next EP elections but also about setting the level of ambition when it comes to preserving and promoting democracy in Europe. This volume is meant to support them in their mission, while anticipating the next time and reminding them that the great countdown towards it has already begun.

1. PRE- AND POST-ELECTION ROLES OF THE EUROMANIFESTOS

Anna Pacześniak

1. PRE- AND POST-ELECTION ROLES OF THE EUROMANIFESTOS

Anna Pacześniak

Introduction

An essential feature of politics – its core – is the clash of visions and rationales, the debate and mutual criticism of political ideas. Political manifestos, “unique in being the only authoritative party policy statement approved by an official convention or congress”,¹ set out the party’s visions and priorities and contain the narrative in which the party wants to emphasise its identity. It is well known that few voters read the manifestos; most citizens vote without knowing what they contain, which does not at all diminish their political significance.

The literature has provided a number of arguments why manifestos “nevertheless do constitute the major indirect influence on what parties are seen standing for”.² Their role is providing a compendium of valid party positions, establishing primacy over all other policy positions attributed to the party, and used as a campaign tool to directly inform voters.³ In addition to the external function of manifestos aimed at the party’s environment, the process of preparing them also has internal functions, such as mobilisation and activation of party members, contribution to deliberative democracy, forging consensus over dividing issues. The role of manifestos are not limited to the pre-election period. In the

case of parties involved in coalition negotiations, the manifesto content can serve as a programmatic basis for formulating the legislative agenda for the post-election years and allocating key policy positions.

European Parliament (EP) elections are still the domain of national parties rooted in national societies, and they draft their own programmes to take into account the domestic context. In this sense, no Euromanifesto, even the best one, prepared at the transnational level, can compete with the programme of a national member party of a Europarty, in terms of persuasion and voter mobilisation. Two main questions can therefore be asked: why do the Europarties put so much effort into preparing the Euromanifestos; and what is their role before and after the EP elections? To answer them, we analyse nine manifestos prepared ahead of the 2024 European elections. After a brief overview of the tradition of research on political manifestos, we first compare how inclusive the process of drafting the Euromanifestos was, and then analyse their content from the perspective of issue ownership and responsiveness. Finally, we focus on the extent to which manifestos set the conditions for post-election alliances and the progressive strategy in this regard.

1. Klingemann, H. D., A. Volkens, J. Bara et al. (2006) *Mapping Policy Preferences II: Estimates for Parties, Electors, and Governments in Central and Eastern Europe, European Union and OECD 1990-2003* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. xvi.
2. Budge, I. (1987) “The internal analysis of election programs”, in I. Budge, D. Robertson and D. Hearl (eds) *Ideology, Strategy, and Party Change: Spatial Analysis of Post-War Election Programmes in 19 Democracies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 18.
3. Eder, N., M. Jenny and W. C. Müller (2017) “Manifesto functions: How party candidates view and use their party’s central policy document”. *Electoral Studies*, 45: 75-87 (p. 76).

Tradition and approaches to manifesto analysis

The importance of manifestos stems directly from the democratic nature of political systems. Manifestos give structure to the electoral campaign, presenting alternative visions of how the state and political community should function and enabling voters to make informed choices, serve to build party coalitions and guide post-election policy. Parties fight elections by rallying behind a manifesto, defining priorities and policy positions, and then the winner implements its policy agenda. In the case of coalition cabinets, government policies are expected to be some kind of compromise based on the political programmes of the participating parties.⁴

Scholars point to several functions of manifestos. Harmel et al.⁵ suggest that manifestos represent trade-offs between the projection of a party's image directed at voters and identity building directed at party members. Evidence from studying manifesto writing suggests that the positions taken in these documents are carefully elaborated and aim to combine electoral appeal with intraparty acceptance.⁶ In the case of Europarties, this often results in "lowest common denominator" compromises. Another point is highlighted by Laver,⁷ who advises distinguishing between ideal political positions (representing the party's true convictions), stated political positions (party ideals adapted to what the audience is considered willing to buy) and policy forecasts (what the party claims it will achieve if it is in power) in manifestos. Given that manifestos

are the "public face" of political parties, they are not necessarily a reliable indicator of party-political choices after elections. They may be deliberately aligned with electoral preferences or reflect a willingness to adapt tactically to the current political climate.⁸

The content of electoral manifestos should focus on what is of interest to voters and propose solutions to their problems, as this demonstrates the responsiveness of political actors. Political parties are "forced" to engage in the discussion of issues that attract attention and are raised by other political actors. Ignoring them could make them appear detached from the needs and concerns of voters.⁹ Hence, the main factor motivating parties to raise certain issues is the context in which the election campaign takes place. Current events affect the psychological accessibility and subjective importance of specific issues – they are factors that grab the electorate's attention.¹⁰ It is therefore completely understandable that, in the 2024 elections, essentially all Europarties decided to devote a lot of space in their manifestos to defence and security policy, the war in Ukraine or energy issues.

The second category of factors determining the content exposed by parties in their manifestos are the images of rival actors operating in the public sphere and collective consciousness, giving certain parties a strategic advantage linked to a certain pool of programme issues they "own". This refers to a situation where certain parties are considered by many voters to be best able to deal with a par-

ticular category of issues (e.g., ecology, migration, social welfare, fiscal sustainability). The two paradigms are, in a sense, complementary and allow for a thorough explanation of what political parties put in their manifestos.¹¹

Underlying the paradigm placing the concept of issue emphasis at the centre, which from the 1980s onwards has dominated thinking about how political parties select the content they communicate to voters in their manifestos, is the assumption that competing for voters' votes is primarily about directing the electorate's attention to carefully selected issues. Petrocik introduced the term issue ownership in this context.¹² In this view, electoral campaigning is primarily about manipulating the importance of topics that focus public attention, rather than aligning a party or candidate's policy positions with the views of the electorate. According to this approach, a party will succeed if it induces voters to make their decisions because of the problem-solving ability attributed to that particular party.

The importance of party manifestos is reflected in the attention given to them by political science. Data on national parties are regularly collected in the Manifesto Research on Political Representation (MARPOR) database, which continues the work of the Manifesto Research Group (MRG 1979-1989) and the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP 1989-2009). Thanks to the collective, systematic work of political scientists from all over the world, who read the manifestos in national languages, code them and perform quantitative content analysis, the database now covers more than 1,000 parties in over 50 countries on five continents. Unfortunately, the MARPOR database does not include Europarties' manifestos.

Euromanifestos: Who, how and what?

Not all Europarties follow a transnational and structured process leading to the formulation of an EU-wide political manifesto. In the case of Eurosceptic actors, this is mainly due to an ideological contestation of the supranational and transnational mechanisms of European integration. However, this is only one, shall we say more elegant, explanation. In fact, an important factor in the lack of a common manifesto is the inability to reconcile divergent positions within a single Europarty. As an extra-parliamentary organisation and transnational advocacy coalition,¹³ a Europarty brings together groups of like-minded actors, representing various organisations, such as national member parties, members of the EP, interest groups, political foundations, grassroots activists and associations that share beliefs and engage in coordinated activity and attempt to influence EU policy. The process of preparing a political manifesto therefore requires finding a compromise between their ideas, needs and expectations. What is not easy but possible within Europarties with similar political priorities, where the political agendas of members can be successfully aggregated, is unfeasible for Europarties, which are an artificial assemblage of loosely affiliated political actors.

Although prior to previous EP elections the preparation of the manifesto varied, depending on the specific Europarties, prior to the 2024 EP elections this goal was achieved by most of them. The nine Euromanifestos, however, vary considerably in terms of length, readability and even in the meaning of the title (Table 1). This overview shows that parties do not always aim to produce the same kind of programme document. Some call a manifesto 4 pages (e.g. European Conservatives and Reformists), others propose 100 pages of text (e.g. European Democratic Party).

4. Ibid, p. 75.
5. Harmel, R., A. C. Tan, K. Janda et al. (2018) "Manifestos and the 'two faces' of parties: Addressing both members and voters with one document". *Party Politics*, 3(24): 278-288.
6. Eder, N., M. Jenny and W. C. Müller (2017) "Manifesto functions: How party candidates view and use their party's central policy document". p. 77.
7. Laver, M. (ed.) (2001) *Estimating the Policy Position of Political Actors* (London: Routledge), p. 67.
8. Pelizzo, R. (2003) "Party positions or party direction? An analysis of party manifesto data". *West European Politics*, 2(26): 67-89.
9. Adams, J., A. B. Haupt and H. Stoll (2009) "What moves parties? The role of public opinion and global economic conditions in Western Europe". *Comparative Political Studies*, 5(42): 611-639 (p. 612).
10. Green-Pedersen, C. and P. B. Mortensen (2015) "Avoidance and engagement: Issue competition in multiparty system". *Political Studies*, 4(63): 747-764 (p. 749).

11. Rafałowski, W. (2023) *Kampanie Parlamentarne w Polsce. Analiza Programów i Apeli Wyborczych w Perspektywie Paradygmatu Ekspozycji Treści [Parliamentary Campaigns in Poland. Analysis of Election Programs and Appeals from the Content Exposure Paradigm Perspective]* (Warsaw: Scholar), p. 11.
12. Petrocik, J. R. (1996) "Issue ownership in presidential election, with a 1980 case study". *American Journal of Political Science*, 3(40): 825-850.
13. Johansson, K. M. and T. Raunio (2024) *Transnational Parties and Advocacy in European Integration* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan).

Table 1. Euromanifestos ahead of the 2024 EP elections.

European political party	Political family	Title of manifesto	No. of pages
European People's Party (EPP)	Christian Democrat/ Conservative	<i>Our Europe, a safe and good home for the people</i>	25
Party of European Socialists (PES)	Socialist/ Social Democrat	<i>The Europe we want: Social, democratic, sustainable</i>	24
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)	Liberal	<i>Your Europe, your freedom: Delivering change for you</i>	26
European Democratic Party (EDP)	Centrist	<i>Reinventing Europe</i>	100
European Green Party (EGP)	Green	<i>Courage to change: Manifesto 2024. Priorities</i>	46
European Free Alliance (EFA)	Regionalist	<i>A Europe for all</i>	16
European Left (PEL)	Socialist/Communist	<i>European elections manifesto 2024</i>	28
European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)	Conservative/ Eurosceptics	<i>ECR party manifesto</i>	4
European Christian Political Movement (ECMP)	Christian-Social	<i>Political program 2024-2029. elevate. empower. engage.</i>	27

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The preparation of the Euromanifesto is a time- and labour-intensive process. Just taking into account and reconciling the positions of member parties operating in different national contexts, each with its own preferences, requires diplomatic talent,¹⁴ political dexterity, experience in building compromises, goodwill and sometimes a willingness to make concessions. However, there are Europarties that go further and invite external actors working with the political family, and even individual citizens, into the manifesto formulation process. The Brussels-based organisation Good Lobby, analysing the manifesto drafting process for the 2024 elections, assigned traffic light colours, from green, signifying the most inclusive, to red, meaning the most exclusive.¹⁵ Generally, the more pro-integration the Europarty stance, the more open, participatory and transparent the manifesto process was. Five parties were

green-labelled, which signified the greatest inclusivity: PES; ALDE; EGP; EDP; and EFA. EPP and PEL have been described as yellow to indicate limited openness to third-party input. ECR and ECMP, labelled red, were closed to third-party input during the manifesto drafting process.

Some examples of what this looked like in practice

The PES manifesto was the result of a consultation not only with member parties, but also with trade unions and organisations. Civil society meetings took place from April to September 2023. In total, the various pieces of feedback covered more than 550 policy priorities and measures. These exchange-

es contributed to the adoption of the resolution at the PES congress in November 2023, which was identified as the starting point from which the European social democratic family created its manifesto over the next few months. In the case of ALDE, to ensure an inclusive and consultative process, the party proposed various opportunities for citizens, businesses, civil society and experts to be involved. Five workshops were organised in February 2023 to gather external expertise and knowledge from civil society, academia and the private sector on the future of globalisation, security and defence, sustainable economy, resilient labour force, and the corruption and enforcement of rules. Furthermore, five citizens' meetings (called "town halls") were held between June and September 2023 in Denmark, Bulgaria, Portugal, Lithuania and Italy. Online consultations were also available. The Greens also relied on online consultation in the process of creating their manifesto, which was open to the public, not only via Green national member parties. Such initiatives were intended to build the image of Europarties that were committed to working with civil society to enhance their bottom-up contribution to democratic decision-making, increase their visibility and transparency, and improve their links with civil society in daily party life. This is particularly relevant for entities traditionally perceived as elite driven, operated in the "Brussels bubble", which have no electorate, membership or grassroots activists and are not embedded in society.¹⁶

The results of months of work, carried out in a more or less inclusive manner, were policy documents produced by nine Europarties. An analysis of the content of the 2024 manifestos, in terms of their responsiveness and issue ownership, shows that European actors are trying to strike a balance between both approaches. The combination of quan-

titative and qualitative analysis allows for in-depth observation and comparisons.

Quantitative analyses of the words used in all nine manifestos and the word clouds generated from this show that terms such as "European", "Europe" or "EU" are the largest in almost every cloud, indicating that the parties want to show their Europeanness. Another quantitative analysis of the content of the manifestos prepared by a team of experts from the European Policy Center,¹⁷ who compared the 2019 manifestos with the 2024 platforms, proves that all Europarties' 2024 manifestos have redirected their attention from social issues to security and defence. Through qualitative in-depth analysis, it is also possible to capture quite a few distinguishing features of the individual manifestos.

Reading the EGP's manifesto leads us to conclude that this Europarty is relying on the strategic advantage of its image as an expert on ecological and environmental issues. The most developed topics were climate and the energy crisis, the state of the planet, the green transition, and so forth. The themes of democracy, feminism, human rights and global justice also featured prominently (see Figure 1). The Greens were also showing their responsive face, devoting space to issues of housing affordability, the protection of workers or fair taxes. However, references to Russia's aggression against Ukraine come rather late in the manifesto, only in its third section entitled "The courage to take responsibility – building a Union of security, peace and global justice". It is hard not to get the impression that the party found it difficult to find the language of its own narrative on military security, but, at the same time, it was clear that it could not leave this issue out of its manifesto because the political context did not allow it.

14. Skrzypek, A. (2016) „Kryzys Unii, idei, polityki? Oferta programowa głównych europartii w kontekście wyborów 2014 R”. Politeja, 43(4): 5-41 (p. 8).

15. "How transparent and democratic was the drafting process behind each Euromanifesto?" Good Lobby.

16. Van Hecke, S. (2018) "Reconnecting European political parties with European Union citizens". Discussion Paper 6. International IDEA, p. 14. DOI: 10.31752/idea.2018.71

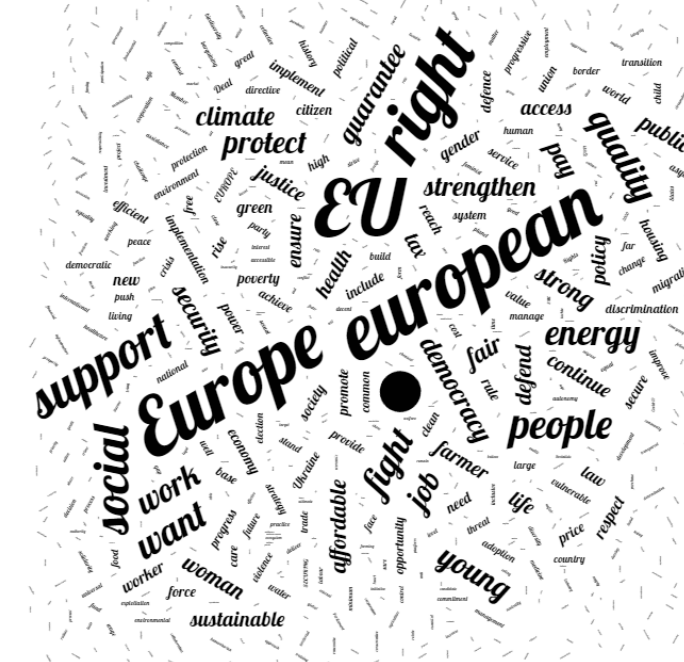
17. "EU elections 2024: What do party manifestos say on key policy issues?" European Policy Center, 5 June 2024.

Figure 5. Word cloud of the EPP manifesto.



A perfect example of balancing “own” issues with responsiveness and consideration of the political context is the PES manifesto. The party has succeeded in maintaining its ideological identity, demonstrating the importance of protecting workers and employment, as well as the well-being of citizens, emphasising that social and climate justice must go hand in hand in the green transformation of Europe. The 2024 PES manifesto also calls for the strengthening of guarantees for better and safer working conditions, adequate minimum incomes and minimum wages, and the full implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. From the perspective of the declarations written into the manifesto, PES remains the largest advocate of social welfare, as measured by the number of words and references to this issue (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Word cloud of the PES manifesto.



However, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the resulting disruption to Europe’s energy security are responsible for the dramatic increase in energy policy issues and defence. This was the case for almost all the manifestos prepared before the 2024 European elections, and the PES platform was no exception. According to calculations by the European Policy Center,¹⁹ the jump in importance of defence and security issues in the PES manifestos was from 2.07% in 2019 to 6.38% in 2024. A similar leap of significance was observed in energy policy: from 0.52% in 2019 to 3.07% in 2024. Since issues hitherto not in the spotlight have gained importance and more sentences have been devoted to them, others have had to give way. In 2024, the PES manifesto devotes less attention to social welfare, reducing the number of references from 10.36% to 4.49%; nevertheless, this is still more than the other Europarties.

The longevity of manifestos after elections

Euromanifestos are used by parties not only to present their vision and ambitions for the EU or to confirm the shared identity of the whole political family, but also to agree the terms and conditions of post-election cooperation and alliances. The Euromanifesto may also include so-called ‘red lines’, which the Europarty pledges not to cross in the post-election negotiation process. It was the case of PES manifesto where we can read: ‘Our political family has a clear red line: we will never cooperate nor form coalitions with the far right’, or the equally clear indication of the impossibility of cooperation with the far right in the Green manifesto by titling one of its chapters ‘The Courage to Stand Up Against the Far Right’, as well as in the manifesto by The Left: ‘The extreme nationalist and neo-fascist right, which is already governing in some countries and is knocking on the doors of power in others, can and must be stopped’. In the case of mainstream Europarties, such as EPP, PES and ALDE, pre-election policy platforms can provide also a programmatic basis for negotiating the legislative agenda for the coming years and filling the EU “top jobs”: President of the European Commission; President of the European Council; High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy; and President of the European Parliament.

Each of the four main EU positions follows its own procedure for proposing and selecting a suitable candidate. The overall composition of the leadership team has to consider various factors, such as party affiliation, geography, population size and gender balance.²⁰ If, in the end, any of these factors fail to be taken into account, the representation of the main Europarties remains crucial. For several terms, the results of the EP elections have shown that no European party can hold a parliamentary majority on its own. Since 2019, for the first time, even the two largest groups, EPP and Socialists and Democrats (S&D), no longer have such a majority. Each successive EP is increasingly fragmented. From 2019 onwards, as

well as after the 2024 elections, a “winning” parliamentary majority has been formed by three groups: EPP; S&D; and Renew Europe. Most members of the European Council also belong to these three parties. Therefore, the success of a possible nominee for the top position depends on whether there is a more powerful alliance behind the candidate, whose strength would be votes in both the EP and the European Council. Tendering involves not only the distribution of key EU posts and top portfolios, but also their link to the priorities of the entire five-year term. In this context, Europarty manifestos have the potential to become starting point for cross-party negotiations based on concrete programme proposals.

With the party and personnel composition of the EU institutions being subject not only to interparty arrangements but also (mainly?) intergovernmental tenders, the potential of the Euromanifestos as the basis of programmes seems greater in terms of building alliances throughout the whole new term and not only at the beginning. Ad hoc coalitions, arrangements for joint votes in the EP, isolating certain political actors or torpedoing dangerous solutions proposed by them will largely relate to Euromanifestos. Indeed, their lifespan is much longer than that of national manifestos, which act more as a contract between a party and its voters. But it is likely that this function of the Euromanifestos will also increase, and in time European citizens will begin to hold the Europarties to account for their promises.

19. “EU elections 2024: What do party manifestos say on key policy issues?” European Policy Center

20. Kreiling, V. (2024) “Procedures, politics, policies: The pieces of the puzzle for the next institutional cycle of the EU”. The Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies, 6 March, pp. 2-3.

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Party manifestos

ALDE (2024) "Your Europe, your freedom: Delivering change for you". Adopted in March 2024.

ECMP (2024) "Political program 2024–2029. elevate. empower. engage".

ECR (2024) "ECR Party manifesto". Adopted at the ECR council meeting in Strasbourg, April 2024.

EDP (2024) "Reinventing Europe. 2024 manifesto".

EFA (2023) "A Europe for all". EFA 2024 European election manifesto approved by the EFA Bureau 22/09/2023; ratified at the EFA Congress 13 October 2023.

EGP (2024) "Courage to change: Manifesto 2024. Priorities". Adopted by the 7th Extended Congress, Lyon, 4 February.

EPP (2024) "Our Europe, a safe and good home for the people". EPP 2024 manifesto adopted at EPP Congress in Bucharest, March 2024.

PEL (2024) "European elections manifesto 2024".

PES (2024) "The Europe we want: Social, democratic, sustainable". PES manifesto for the 2024 European elections. Adopted at the 2024 PES Election Congress, 2 March, Rome.



2. THE “SPITZENKANDIDATEN” PROCEDURE’S POTENTIAL TO ENHANCE EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NEXT EUROPEAN ELECTIONS IN 2029

Julian Plottka

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[...] the beginning of a democratic (r)evolution: History in making!”, tweeted the then head of the Federal Chancellery in Germany, Peter Altmaier, on 27 May 2014, when the leaders of the political groups in the European Parliament backed the *Spitzenkandidat* of the victorious European People’s Party (EPP), Jean-Claude Juncker, as the new president of the European Commission. What was an electoral defeat for the Party of European Socialists (PES), which came second behind the EPP, was an achievement for European democracy, which the EU owed largely to Martin Schulz. As president of the European Parliament, he not only became the *Spitzenkandidat* of PES, he also seized the opportunity to promote and popularise the concept and make European elections more democratic. The nomination of further candidates by the parties of the left, the Greens and the liberals revitalised the lead candidate process in 2013/2014 to such an extent that the rather sceptical EPP also nominated a *Spitzenkandidat*.¹

However, the conservative heads of state and government of Germany, Hungary, Sweden and the UK wanted to preserve the right of the European Coun-

cil to freely choose their candidate and to “take into account” only the result of the European elections (article 17(7)1 Treaty on European Union, TEU). It took exactly one month for the major parties in the European Parliament, who backed Juncker, to force the European Council to accept the *Spitzenkandidaten* system and nominate him by majority vote.² In return for supporting Juncker, PES negotiated a deal and Social democrats became President of the European Parliament, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and First Vice-President of the European Commission. The fact that a grand coalition of EPP and PES, (partly) supported by liberals and Greens, had to unite the European Parliament against the European Council to strengthen party politics and parliamentary democracy in the EU is the biggest contradiction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure.

The reason for the stand-off between the European Parliament and the European Council was the wording in article 17(7) TEU, which could be interpreted differently. During the European Convention, it was impossible to agree on a more precise description. Although a further strengthening of the role of the

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1. Christiansen, T. (2015) “EU-Spitzenkandidaten – neue Impulse und ihre Folgen für das politische System der EU”. *Integration*, 1(38): 30-31.
 2. The prime ministers of Hungary and the United Kingdom did not support his nomination. European Council (2014) “European Council 26/27 June 2014. Conclusions”, EUCO 79/14.

European Parliament was favoured,³ there was no agreement on whether the European Commission should become a government in a parliamentary democracy or remain a regulatory body.⁴ Following the success of the European Parliament in 2014, observers expected the events to set a precedent for future European elections.⁵

In 2019, the situation was more difficult: French President Macron was against *Spitzenkandidaten*, while within the liberal party there was a competition for the position of the *Spitzenkandidat*. The liberal's compromise of nominating a candidate team "killed"⁶ the procedure. The reason for their rejection was their strong support for transnational lists, the introduction of which EPP had rejected in the European Parliament.⁷ After the elections, EPP, PES and the liberals⁸ tried to push through their respective favourites: Manfred Weber; Franz Timmermans; and Margarethe Vestager.⁹ Together with the Green Party, they negotiated on possible coalitions. However, neither Weber, due to his conservative po-

sitions,¹⁰ nor the "rule of law hawk" Timmermans¹¹ had sufficient support in both institutions. At the end of June 2019, the heads of state and government nominated Ursula von Leyen as their candidate.¹² After offering several concessions to the European Parliament, including the Conference on the Future of Europe,¹³ she was finally elected. In 2019, the European Council was able to exploit the competition between three parties in the European Parliament to its advantage and regain control of the nomination process.

In its 2022 legislative resolution on the reform of European electoral law, establishing transnational lists, drafted by rapporteur Domènec Ruiz Devesa, the European Parliament proposed to make the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure binding through an interinstitutional agreement.¹⁴ Without arousing much interest, the EPP nominated Ursula von der Leyen as their candidate, just as PES, the liberals and the Greens put forward candidates. Based on the election results of May 2024, the Europe-

an Council nominated the incumbent Commission president for a second term in June 2024,¹⁵ who was elected in July 2024.¹⁶

Based on these three different applications of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure in 2014, 2019 and 2024, it is time to analyse its effects on European democracy. Is the idea of having *Spitzenkandidaten* really the Trojan horse of parliamentary democracy in the European treaties? So far, it is just clear that the concept is not sure-fire success but needs further support. This paper analyses its effects in more detail. Therefore, in Section 1, the "standard version" of the democratic deficit of the EU is briefly outlined as a benchmark to assess the contribution of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process to enhance European representative democracy. Section 2 outlines the potential impact that the procedure might have on the political system of the EU and European elections, making both more democratic, before Section 3 provides empirical evidence of its real-world impact. Finally, Section 4, provides recommendations to leverage the impact of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process on European democracy in future European elections.

1. What is the democratic deficit of the EU? It is not yet a parliamentary democracy

Following three decades of further debate on the so-called "democratic deficit" of the EU,¹⁷ its "standard version", as defined by Weiler, Haltern and Franz,¹⁸ remains valid. It contains five arguments.¹⁹ Firstly, national executives in the Councils and the Commission dominate European politics. "[E]nhanced policy coordination"²⁰ led the Commission to become the "winner of the [Euro] crisis"²¹ and the influence of the European Council has further increased in some policy areas.²² Secondly, the European Parliament does not have sufficient powers to be a "true" parliament. The last major treaty reform considerably strengthened its competences,²³ but the Council still remains the more powerful chamber. Thirdly, European elections are not supranational. The seminal thesis of European elections being second-order national elections²⁴ also remains valid for the most recent elections.²⁵ Fourthly, there is a gap between European voters and EU institutions, which makes voters feel distant

3. Pöttsch, U. (2019) "Streit um Spitzenkandidaten-Prozess. Blockade der Wahl des EU-Kommissionspräsidenten muss verhindert werden". Centre for European Policy, cepAdhoc, 24 May.
4. Göler, D. (2006) *Deliberation – Ein Zukunftsmodell europäischer Entscheidungsfindung? Analyse der Beratungen des Verfassungskonvents 2002-2003* (Baden-Baden: Nomos), p. 235.
5. Göler, D. and M. Jopp (2014) "Die Europawahl 2014 und das Konzept der Spitzenkandidaten – ein Kommentar". *integration*, 2(37): 152-160.
6. Juncker, J.-C. (2019) "Arrival and doorstep EC President Juncker". European Council of the European Union, 30 June.
7. Plümer, S. and A. Goldmann (2020) "Künftige Königsmacher? Die Europawahl 2019 aus Sicht der Liberalen", in M. Kaeding, M. Müller and J. Schmälter (eds) *Die Europawahl 2019. Ringen um die Zukunft Europas* (Wiesbaden: Springer), pp. 55-56.
8. EPP and S&D had lost their joint majority in the European Parliament and each party had seven members in the European Council in May 2019. Nasshoven, Y. (2019) "'To be or not to be?' Das Spitzenkandidatenprinzip in der Europawahl 2019 und zukünftige Szenarien". *integration*, 4(42): 280-296.
9. Nasshoven, Y. (2019) "'To be or not to be?' Das Spitzenkandidatenprinzip in der Europawahl 2019 und zukünftige Szenarien".
10. Müller, M. (2020) "Das Polarisierungsdilemma: Streit zwischen den Parteien belebte 2019 den Europawahlkampf – und ließ dann die Spitzenkandidaten scheitern". *Der (europäische) Föderalist*, 16 July.
11. The Visegrád countries opposed him.
12. European Council (2019) "Special meeting of the European Council (30 June, 1 and 2 July 2019) – conclusions", EUCO 18/19.
13. Plottka, J. (2021) *Making the Conference on the Future of Europe a Success* (Brussels: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung).
14. European Parliament (2022) "Election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage. European Parliament legislative resolution of 3 May 2022 on the proposal for a council regulation on the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage, repealing council decision (76/787/ECSC, EEC, Euratom) and the act concerning the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage annexed to that decision (2020/2220(INL) – 2022/0902(APP)), P9_TA(2022)0129", D.

15. European Council (2024) "European Council meeting (27 June 2024) – conclusions", EUCO 15/24.
16. Moens, B., E. Wax and M. Giera (2024) "Ursula von der Leyen wins second term as European Commission president". Politico.eu, 18 July.
17. Plottka, J. and N. Rebmann (2022) "Demokratiedefizit", in W. Weidenfeld, W. Wessels and F. Tekin (eds) *Europa von A bis Z* (Wiesbaden: Springer Reference). DOI: 10.1007/978-3-658-24456-9_34-2.
18. Weiler, J.H.H., Haltern, U.R. and Mayer, F. (1995) "European Democracy and its Critique". *West European Politics*, 3(18): 4–39.
19. Føllesdal, A. and S. Hix (2006) "Why there is a democratic deficit in the EU: A response to Majone and Moravcsik". *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 3(44): 533-562. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-5965.2006.00650.x.
20. Rasmussen, Mette B. (2018) "Accountability challenges in EU economic governance? Parliamentary scrutiny of the European Semester". *Journal of European Integration*, (3)40: 341–357.
21. Bauer, M. W. and S. Becker (2014) "The unexpected winner of the crisis: The European Commission's strengthened role in economic governance". *Journal of European Integration*, 3(36): 213-229. DOI: 10.1080/07036337.2014.885750.
22. Müller Gómez, J. and W. Reiners (2019) "Rivalität mit System? Zehn Jahre institutioneller Wettbewerb zwischen Europäischem Parlament und Europäischem Rat". *integration*, 4(42): 262-279.
23. Leinen, J. (2010) "Das Europäische Parlament und der Vertrag von Lissabon", in O. Leiß (ed.) *Die Europäische Union nach dem Vertrag von Lissabon* (Springer: Wiesbaden), pp. 97-113.
24. Reif, K. and H. Schmitt (1980) "Nine second-order national elections: A conceptual framework for the analysis of European election results". *European Journal of Political Research*, 1(8): 3-44. DOI: 10.1111/j.1475-6765.1980.tb00737.x.
25. Träger, H. and L. H. Anders (2020) "Die Europawahl 2019 – wieder eine second-order election? Eine Analyse der Wahlergebnisse in den 28 EU-Staaten", in M. Kaeding, M. Müller and J. Schmälter (eds) *Die Europawahl 2019. Ringen um die Zukunft Europas* (Wiesbaden: Springer), pp. 315-326.

from “Brussels”. While research finds a Europeanisation of national public spheres²⁶ and a strengthened European party system,²⁷ the intermediary system is not yet sufficiently successful at closing this gap. Most notably parties on the European level remain umbrella organisations, which should grant its individual members more participation rights to activate them to close the gap.²⁸ Fifthly, EU-level policy making is characterised by policy drift. Consensual decision-making tends to favour centrist positions, and the EU primary law is biased towards neoliberal policy outcomes.²⁹

The so-called thesis of an institutional deficit of European democracy by Føllesdal and Hix³⁰ shares this standard critique of European democracy; however, it assumes that institutional reform helps to elevate and finally overcome these deficiencies. Putting parliamentary democracy centre stage, strengthening the European Parliament and making European elections more meaningful³¹ are the approaches to overcome all five deficits. This paper shares this view: representative democracy is the backbone of the EU’s political system³² and takes the perspective of how the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure can and has actually contributed to strengthening European democracy by turning the EU into a fully-fledged parliamentary system.

2. How can the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure enhance European democracy? Empower the parliament and make European elections more supranational

Giving European voters the power to choose the Commission president in European elections can contribute in three ways to enhancing European democracy: (1) the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure can strength the European Parliament by making the Commission more accountable; (2) the personalisation of European elections can increase turnout and facilitate media coverage; and (3) raising the stakes in European elections through a binding *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure can mobilise political parties and campaigners.

Making the Commission more accountable

The right to elect the Commission president (articles 11(4) and 17(7) TEU) and approving its college (article 17(7) TEU) already establishes political accountability of the Commission to the directly elected members of the European Parliament (MEPs). However, the European Council’s right to propose a candidate for the vote in parliament counterbalances the MEPs’ influence on the Commission presi-

dent, who owes their mandate to two institutions. As the parliament’s power to dismiss the Commission (article 234 Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, TFEU) requires a two-thirds majority, a vote of no confidence is not an instrument that MEPs can use to establish stronger accountability.

A mandatory *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure, including a stable coalition in parliament supporting the Commission president, would help to diminish executive dominance, as the European Parliament’s control function is strengthened. Formally, only the parliament’s electoral function is strengthened; however, the increased parliamentary accountability of the Commission reinforces the parliament’s political influence on EU policy making. A political mandate of the Commission and increased accountability would help to overcome the centrist bias of EU policies and give citizens a clearer choice about policies in European elections. This could motivate citizens to vote and party members to campaign in European elections, making the elections more supranational.

A mandatory *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure also has the potential to recalibrate the institutional equilibrium of the EU in favour of the European Parliament and supranational politics. Since the early 1990s, a tendency towards a “New Intergovernmentalism”³³ has been observed, further boosted by the strengthened role of the European Council since 2009 and “enhanced policy cooperation” during

recent crises.³⁴ A Commission depending on the parliament would more likely return to being its supranational ally and stop further tendencies towards intergovernmental integration, even though already established procedures, most notably in the Economic and Monetary Union, cannot be easily reformed.³⁵ The hearings of the new Commission in 2024, most notably of Spanish candidate Teresa Ribera Rodríguez, whom Conservatives and right-wing Extremists heavily scrutinised in a political competition between centre-left and right parties in the European Parliament, point towards such a development. Paradoxically, this supranationalisation of the EU’s political system empowers the Europe-sceptics and not the pro-European parties.

Personalising of European electoral campaigns

In an era of declining party loyalty and volatile voting, personalisation is expected to mobilise voters,³⁶ especially where the candidates actively campaign.³⁷ Instead of parties, political leaders offer a new object voters can identify with.³⁸ The latter also prefer to hold politicians accountable for policies instead of institutions.³⁹ Through increased personalisation, the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure aligns European elections with how national-level elections function in most Western democracies.

26. Risse, T. (ed.) (2014) *European Public Spheres. Politics Is Back* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

27. Liedtke, E. (2020) “40 Jahre Europawahlen – und noch immer kein europäisches Parteiensystem?” in M. Kaeding, M. Müller and J. Schmälter (eds) *Die Europawahl 2019: Ringen um die Zukunft Europas* (Wiesbaden: Springer), pp. 105-118.

28. Hertner, I. (2019) “United in diversity? Europarties and their individual members’ rights”. *Journal of European Integration*, 4(42): 487-505.

29. Höpner, M. and A. Schäfer (2008) “Grundzüge einer politökonomischen Perspektive auf die europäische Integration”, in M. Höpner and A. Schäfer (eds) *Die politische Ökonomie der Europäischen Integration* (Frankfurt: Campus), pp. 11-45.

30. Føllesdal, A. and S. Hix (2006) “Why there is a democratic deficit in the EU: A response to Majone and Moravcsik”.

31. Müller, M. (2020) *Make European Elections More Meaningful. How to Reinforce Parliamentary Democracy at the EU Level* (Brussels: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung).

32. Participative democracy can be a complementary contribution to strengthening European democracy. However, this aspect has been addressed elsewhere. Müller, M. and J. Plottka (2020) *Enhancing the Democratic Legitimacy of the European Union. Short and Long-Term Avenues to Reinforce Parliamentary and Participative Democracy at the EU Level* (Brussels: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung); J. Plottka (2020) *Make Civil Society Involvement Bottom-Up. How to Reinforce Participative Democracy at the EU Level* (Brussels: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung).

33. Bickerton/Hodson/Puetter (2015) “The New Intergovernmentalism: European Integration in the Post-Maastricht Era”. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 4(53): 703-722.

34. Bauer, M. W. and S. Becker (2014) “The unexpected winner of the crisis: The European Commission’s strengthened role in economic governance”.

35. Plottka, J. (2020) *Make EU Economic Policy Accountable. How to Reinforce the Democratic Legitimacy of European Economic Governance* (Brussels: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung).

36. Webb, P. and T. Poguntke (2005) “The presidentialization of contemporary democratic politics: Evidence, causes and consequences”, in T. Poguntke and P. Webb (eds) *The Presidentialization of Politics. A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 336-356.

37. Schmitt, H., S. Hobolt and S. A. Popa (2015) “Does personalization increase turnout? Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 European Parliament elections”. *European Union Politics*, 3(16): 347-368. DOI: 10.1177/1465116515584626.

38. Ibid, 353.

39. Bean C, Mughan A (1989) “Leadership effects in parliamentary elections: Australia and Britain”. *American Political Science Review*, 4(83): 1165–1179.

Personalisation is also important for the way media covers politics: it allows journalists to transmit information in times of visualisation by linking political content to specific politicians, who are then recognised by voters.⁴⁰ Increased news exposure and, in turn, increased citizens' recognition of candidates are expected to increase the turnout in European elections.⁴¹ Thus, personalisation can help to further Europeanise news coverage and electoral campaigns.

Concerning the dominance of executives in EU politics, personalisation could even have an adverse effect, as it provides leaders with individual legitimacy,⁴² which does not derive from political parties. Personalisation is, however, expected to increase the turnout in European elections and thereby strengthen the parliament's legitimacy and political influence. Furthermore, personalisation has a potentially positive effect on the supranationalisation of European elections by making citizens more familiar with the elections, which become more similar to national elections. It can also facilitate media reporting about European elections, contributing to the Europeanisation of national public spheres. These ways, the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure bridges the perceived gap between citizens and Brussels by making EU politicians more familiar to voters. Effects on policy drift in the EU are expected to be indirect through a stronger legitimacy of the Commission president and the European Parliament if turnout increases.

Activating political parties to campaign for European elections

These effects of personalisation are not limited to voters, but also affect political parties and their activists. It also helps parties to design their election campaigns. If all member parties of a political party at the European level (European parties) feature a common frontrunner in their political campaigns, the notoriously national campaigns for European elections become more Europeanised.⁴³ If the *Spitzenkandidaten* set policy priorities within the party families' EU-wide electoral platforms, this can also contribute to more Europeanised campaigns in those countries where the member parties are ideologically close to the candidate.⁴⁴

In a mandatory *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure, European parties could become more attractive to ambitious politicians and office-seeking parties trying to win the position of Commission president, as they become the gate keepers to the "Berlaymont".⁴⁵ Internal party competition for the candidate role has the potential to vitalise European parties. The same logic applies to member parties and campaigners on the ground. If the position of Commission president and policy priorities for the next five years in the EU are at stake, they are more likely ready to invest additional resources and effort in European election campaigns.

The agency of a committed frontrunner could also have a significant impact on electoral campaigns. Popular candidates mobilise party campaigners, as the recent example of Kamala Harris has shown in the 2024 US presidential race. Before, Martin Schulz proved that this also affected other parties. The committed candidate of one party can trigger other parties to follow suit in the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure and make it more dynamic.⁴⁶

The potential effects of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure on European parties and their electoral campaigns would most notably alleviate the democratic deficit of the EU by making the European elections more supranational, as campaigns become more coherent in terms of candidates and policies across the 27 member states, and by bridging the gap between citizens and EU institutions as national parties and campaigners are more engaged. They also have a positive effect on the European parties by forcing them to campaign on the same EU-wide issues featured by the *Spitzenkandidaten*. This helps to overcome the current strong focus on national campaign issues. Concerning the executive dominance, the powers of the European parliament and policy drift in the EU are only secondary, as more supranational elections would, in turn, help to address these deficits.

3. Has the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure empowered the parliament? Limited impact, so far

Having discussed the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure's potential to enhance European democracy, this section summarises the current state of research to discuss its actual impact. Concerning the dominance of the executive in EU politics, the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure is not sufficiently established to tilt the competition between the supranational and intergovernmental logic of EU decision-making towards the European Parliament.⁴⁷ While Christiansen⁴⁸ sees for 2014 a "supranational momentum" strengthening the parliament, Crum⁴⁹ interprets the events of 2019 as evidence that intergovernmental politics have ended the long-term trend of parliamentarisation in the EU.⁵⁰ Article 17(7) TEU offers an opportunity structure for the parliament to gain more powers but does not guarantee them. Therefore, the leaders of the parties in parliament need to prepare for the next election of Commission president well in advance. Undermining the aim of bringing more party competition into EU governance, a coherently acting parliament will be needed to regain the momentum from the heads of state or government. Therefore, progressive forces must convince all democratic groups in the European Parliament of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure's benefits.

40. McAllister, I. (2007) "The personalization of politics", in R. J. Dalton and H.-D. Klingemann (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 579.

41. Gattermann, K. and C. de Vreese (2020) "Awareness of Spitzenkandidaten in the 2019 European elections: The effects of news exposure in domestic campaign contexts". *Research and Politics*, 2(7): 3. DOI: 10.1177/2053168020915332.

42. McAllister, I. (2007) "The personalization of politics", pp. 585.

43. Hobolt, S. B. (2014) "A vote for the president? The role of Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 European Parliament elections". *Journal of European Public Policy*, 10(21): 1534. DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2014.941148.

44. Braun, D. and T. Schwarzbözl (2019) "Put in the spotlight or largely ignored? Emphasis on the Spitzenkandidaten by political parties in their online campaigns for European elections". *Journal of European Public Policy*, 3(26): 432. DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2018.1454493

45. Braun, D. and S. A. Popa (2018) "This time it was different? The salience of the Spitzenkandidaten system among European parties". *West European Politics*, 5(41): 1129. DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2017.1419003

46. Corbett, R. (2014) "European elections are second-order elections: Is received wisdom changing?" *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 6(52): 1197. DOI: 10.1111/jcms.12187.

47. Heidebreder, E. G. and D. Schade (2020) "(Un)settling the precedent: Contrasting institutionalisation dynamics in the Spitzenkandidaten procedure of 2014 and 2019". *Research and Politics*, 2(7). DOI: 10.1177/2053168020925975.

48. Christiansen, T. (2016) "After the Spitzenkandidaten: Fundamental change in the EU's political system?" *West European Politics*, 5(39): 992-1010. DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2016.1184414.

49. Crum, B. (2023) "Why the European Parliament lost the Spitzenkandidaten-process". *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2(30): 193-213. DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2022.2032285.

50. Bressanelli, E., M. Ceron and T. Christiansen (2024) "Much ado about nothing? Assessing the impact of the Spitzenkandidaten process on EU policy-making", in M. Ceron, T. Christiansen and D. G. Dimitrak (eds) *The Politicisation of the European Commission's Presidency: Spitzenkandidaten and Beyond* (Cham: European Administrative Governance), pp. 289-312.

Beside the conclusion on its electoral function, the assessment of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure's impact on the parliament's powers is even more ambiguous. For the first years of the Juncker Commission, Christiansen finds a more structured cooperation between the parliament and Commission.⁵¹ However, an analysis of voting in the European Parliament during its previous three terms does not find any impact on EU policy making.⁵² The Commission was not supported by a stable majority in parliament but relied on grand or even oversized coalitions. The electoral success of right-wing populist and extremist parties could undermine any future development towards coalition building in the European Parliament. However, the political parties should continue to work towards formal coalitions in the future, as they tried in 2019. Otherwise, the "political Commission" might not be a parliamentary one, as there is a trend towards presidentialisation of the European Commission. It started under Juncker, based on his legitimacy as *Spitzenkandidat*, but continued under Ursula von der Leyen, who mainly owed her legitimacy to the European Council.⁵³

Concerning the European elections, several observers criticised pro-European candidates for not differing much in their positions⁵⁴ and the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure did not trigger party political competition.⁵⁵ For the 2019 electoral cam-

paigns, Heidbreder and Schade found,⁵⁶ however, that the *Spitzenkandidaten* campaigns were more polarized. This is supported by the fact that both Weber and Timmermans' bids for Commission presidency were rejected on the grounds of their policy positions. In an experimental setting, Maier et al. found that even watching the 2014 *Spitzenkandidaten* debates helped well-educated test persons to differentiate the ideological positions of the candidates.⁵⁷ While the polarisation of electoral campaigns on policy issues is a positive trend needed to further parliamentarise the EU political system – giving voters a real choice in European elections – there is considerable danger that such campaigns end up being unfulfilled promises. As discussed before, the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure was no game-changer away from consensual decision-making and centrist-oriented policy drift in the EU.⁵⁸ Therefore, the polarisation of EU electoral campaigns must result in stable coalitions in the European Parliament, which make a difference in policies. Otherwise, voters' frustration about EU democracy will increase.

The most important benchmark for evaluating European elections is turnout. It reached an all-time low in 2014 (42.61%) and jumped to 50.66% in 2019 and 51.05% in 2024. The reversal of the continuous negative trend since 1979 has been attributed to the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure. While it is difficult to

assess how strong other factors, such as the increasing salience of EU politics, affected the turnout in addition to the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure, there is some evidence that the latter has at least a modest effect: Schmitt et al. find that the recognition of candidates has a positive effect on voters' willingness to vote.⁵⁹ The overall recognition of candidates by voters is, however, low. In only a few countries do more than 50% of voters know the candidates.⁶⁰ Analysing the European elections in 2014, Gattermann and de Vreese are also sceptical about whether the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure raises awareness for the European elections.⁶¹

The general assessment for the whole EU gets more nuanced if member states are analysed separately. These analyses reveal considerable differences between countries. Among ten countries, Hobolt finds the lowest level of awareness in the UK and the highest in Luxembourg, France, Germany and Italy.⁶² In the last four countries, a *Spitzenkandidat* was running for parliament in 2014. Gattermann and de Vreese also find that candidate recognition is highest in their home countries.⁶³ In her analysis of the media coverage of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure, Gattermann reveals that a positive public attitude towards European integration has a positive effect

on the media presence of the *Spitzenkandidaten*.⁶⁴ In addition, Schmitt et al. find that campaign visits from the candidates have a positive effect on turnout.⁶⁵ The positive conclusion from these analyses is that *Spitzenkandidaten* can indeed make a difference and help to bridge the gap between voters and EU institutions. However, they make it in just a few countries, as support for the procedure on the national level is still insufficient and circumstances are not supportive in all EU member states.

The same patterns have been found for national parties' willingness to engage in campaigns for the candidates. Despite TV debates between the candidates, which, on average, 15% of voters watched in 2014, there were no truly pan-European campaigns. The *Spitzenkandidaten* had to rely on the national parties.⁶⁶ These, however, did not feature them prominently in national electoral campaigns, unless the candidate came from the respective country.⁶⁷ For the few parties featuring the respective candidate(s), Braun and Popa find that strategic considerations of national parties play a role.⁶⁸ Some consider the *Spitzenkandidat* an opportunity to underline their pro-European position; some are motivated by the aim of seeking the office of Commission president.

51. Christiansen, T. (2016) "After the Spitzenkandidaten: Fundamental change in the EU's political system?"

52. Bressanelli, E., M. Ceron and T. Christiansen (2024) "Much ado about nothing? Assessing the impact of the Spitzenkandidaten process on EU policy-making".

53. Connolly, S. and H. Kassim (2024) "The Juncker Commission: Internal perceptions of a Spitzenkandidaten presidency", in M. Ceron, T. Christiansen and D. G. Dimitrak (eds) *The Politicisation of the European Commission's Presidency: Spitzenkandidaten and Beyond* (Cham: European Administrative Governance), pp. 215-249.

54. Hobolt, S. B. (2014) "A vote for the president? The role of Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 European Parliament elections".

55. Christiansen, T. (2016) "After the Spitzenkandidaten: Fundamental change in the EU's political system?"

56. Heidbreder, E. G. and D. Schade (2020) "(Un)settling the precedent: Contrasting institutionalisation dynamics in the Spitzenkandidaten procedure of 2014 and 2019".

57. Maier, J., T. Faas, B. Rittberger et al. (2018) "This time it's different? Effects of the Eurovision debate on young citizens and its consequence for EU democracy – evidence from a quasi-experiment in 24 countries". *Journal of European Public Policy*, 4(25): 606-629. DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2016.1268643.

58. See also E. G. Heidbreder and D. Schade (2024) "Interinstitutional conflict in the context of leadership appointment of the Commission", in M. Ceron, T. Christiansen and D. G. Dimitrak (eds) *The Politicisation of the European Commission's Presidency: Spitzenkandidaten and Beyond* (Cham: European Administrative Governance), pp. 197-213.

59. Schmitt, H., S. Hobolt and S. A. Popa (2015) "Does personalization increase turnout? Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 European Parliament elections".

60. Hobolt, S. B. (2014) "A vote for the president? The role of Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 European Parliament elections". 1536

61. Gattermann, K. and C. de Vreese (2020) "Awareness of Spitzenkandidaten in the 2019 European elections: The effects of news exposure in domestic campaign contexts".

62. Hobolt, S. B. (2014) "A vote for the president? The role of Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 European Parliament elections". 1536

63. Gattermann, K. and C. de Vreese (2020) "Awareness of Spitzenkandidaten in the 2019 European elections: The effects of news exposure in domestic campaign contexts".

64. Gattermann, K. (2015). "Europäische Spitzenkandidaten und deren (Un-)Sichtbarkeit in der nationalen Zeitungsberichterstattung". In M. Kaeding and N. Switek (eds.) *Die Europawahl 2014: Spitzenkandidaten, Protestparteien, Nichtwähler* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS), pp. 211-222.

65. Schmitt, H., S. Hobolt and S. A. Popa (2015) "Does personalization increase turnout? Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 European Parliament elections".

66. Hobolt, S. B. (2014) "A vote for the president? The role of Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 European Parliament elections".

67. Braun, D. and T. Schwarzbözl (2019) "Put in the spotlight or largely ignored? Emphasis on the Spitzenkandidaten by political parties in their online campaigns for European elections".

68. Braun, D. and S. A. Popa (2018) "This time it was different? The salience of the Spitzenkandidaten system among European parties".

Analyses of both the media coverage and the electoral campaigns show that the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure is not a means to Europeanise national publics and parties. However, if the national public and elites are pro-European, the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure makes a (small) difference and makes electoral campaigns more supranational. The necessary condition is that national parties have a direct benefit from engaging with the *Spitzenkandidaten*. Here, we find that the combination of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure and transnational lists can multiply the effect for countries where the *Spitzenkandidaten* ran for office in the past. If the *Spitzenkandidaten* run for office with a team of transnational candidates from different countries, more national parties have an incentive to support transnational campaigns. The transnational candidates are accelerators for the national parties to work towards the supranationalisation of electoral campaigns in the future.

4. How to make the Spitzenkandidaten procedure work: Engaging is more important than reforming

The discussion of the potential and actual impact of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure has shown that the current treaty provisions are an opportunity structure, which the European Parliament must make use of to make the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure work. Institutional reform would make it simpler for the parliament to win the contestation with the European Council, but against the backdrop of most member states' unwillingness to consider treaty change, the European Parliament must prepare for a *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure in 2029 based on the current provisions. However, it should also continue to push for reform, as the revived enlargement process opens a window of opportunity in the mid-term perspective. Reforms to further parliamentarise the EU would complement the following measure, but additional proposals are beyond the scope of this paper.

4.1. Agree on a plan for the 2029 Spitzenkandidaten procedure

Following the example of Martin Schulz, the progressive parties should adopt a plan soon for the selection of their *Spitzenkandidaten* and already start the electoral campaign in late 2028. Setting a precedent for the 2029 elections early enough will exert pressure on the other European parties to follow their example. Getting the more sceptical liberals on board is crucial for the conflict with the European Council following the elections. A fair and widely accepted internal selection procedure contributes to the legitimacy of the candidate and the parties' support for them.

4.2. Select a candidate committed to the procedure

As the previous elections have shown, agency is of crucial importance for the success of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure. Therefore, the selected candidate should consider the procedure an end in and of itself, and not just a necessary condition for being eligible to become Commission president. An important office on the EU level would offer the candidate additional visibility. Concerning their political priorities, the candidate needs to balance a partisan profile to secure support from within PES and make party competition work and a moderate profile not to alienate any of the heads of state or government.

4.3. Prepare for coalition negotiations following the 2029 elections

Following the next European elections, the European Parliament has to be quick to control the procedure. Therefore, the parties in parliament should prepare to start coalition negotiations soon after the elections and end

them before the European Council can take any decisions (probably four weeks). A stable coalition, on which the next Commission president can rely throughout their term, would be a considerable step towards the parliamentarisation of the EU. The parliament would have an influence on the president's political priorities and the "mission letters" of the designated commissioners, while the Commission president can rely on parliament's support.

4.4. Combine the Spitzenkandidaten procedure and transnational lists

More difficult is the establishment of transnational lists, which should be led by the *Spitzenkandidat*. Support from member states is needed, but the parliament has no lever to force them. While in 2024 neither Schmit nor von der Leyen really ran for parliament, linking the *Spitzenkandidaten* to the transnational lists would contribute to a Europeanisation of the electoral campaigns. More national parties would be directly linked to the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure, raising their visibility with the public and activating national parties to engage. It is also a means to alleviate the language problem, as the campaign team can communicate in more European languages. Furthermore, the transnational lists are crucial to get support from the liberals for the procedure.

4.5. Make the Spitzenkandidaten procedure legally compulsory

The European Parliament already proposed to make the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure compulsory in an interinstitutional agreement. While solving the interinstitutional conflict by

legal codification once and for all would allow the parliament to concentrate on other priorities, it is unlikely that the European Council is ready to give up on its own competence. Therefore, the parliament should seek legal clarification in an interinstitutional agreement only if a window of opportunity opens. Otherwise, the reform of article 17(7) TEU should be put on the agenda for the next treaty reform to assign the prerogative to the European Parliament, as the parliament has already proposed.⁶⁹

69. European Parliament (2023) "European Parliament resolution of 22 November 2023 on proposals of the European Parliament for the amendment of the Treaties (2022/2051(INL)), A9-0337/2023". Amendment 41.

3. THE SPITZENKANDIDATEN STRIKE BACK? THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE LEAD CANDIDATE SYSTEM

Wouter Wolfs

3. THE SPITZENKANDIDATEN STRIKE BACK? THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE LEAD CANDIDATE SYSTEM

Wouter Wolfs

1. The idea of *Spitzenkandidaten*

The lead candidate system has been part of the European electoral process for almost two decades. In the three most recent European elections, European political parties have put forward their “*Spitzenkandidaten*”, their candidate(s) for the position of president of the European Commission. These also act as the main political figureheads of the Europarties and campaign on the basis of the European party programme. In the lead candidate logic, a vote for a national member party in the European elections should also be seen as a token of (indirect) support for the Europarty’s *Spitzenkandidat*. In other words, votes for the Party of European Socialists (PES) member parties in the European elections should also be considered as a vote for the Europarty’s lead candidate. The candidate that is able to secure a majority in the European Parliament should subsequently be placed at the helm of the EU executive.

This is nothing extraordinary: elections at the national level usually follow a similar logic. In most countries, the top candidates of the main political parties compete for the post of prime minister. Yet, although they stand for election in only one specific electoral district – which often comprises only a limited part of the country’s territory – it is clear that a vote for their party in other districts also increases their chances of leading the next government. For example, during the 2021 elections in Germany, Olaf Scholz was a candidate in Potsdam, but a vote for the Social Democratic Party of

Germany (SPD) in other districts also supported his bid for Chancellor. The lead candidate system thus aspires to introduce a similar dynamic at the European level.

Proponents of the system have pointed to many benefits: it gives voters a say on who should be at the head of the European Commission, and thus, makes the selection a lot more transparent. It indeed stands in stark contrast to the traditional closed-door negotiations in the European Council, where the position of Commission president is part of a wider “horse trading” exercise among the heads of state and government for all EU top jobs. As such, the leader of the Commission – and the College as a whole – gains a much stronger legitimacy, in particular if the lead candidate stood for election on an electoral list.

In addition, because of the influence of voters on the leader of the Commission, the (perceived) importance of the European elections increases, which can, in turn, boost electoral turnout. The debates and campaign activities of the various lead candidates can also help to “Europeanise” the ballot, because they would mostly revolve around EU-related messages. This could help to diminish the current dominant nature of the EU elections as “second-order national elections”. It ensures that the electoral competition revolves around European policy choices and the future of the EU as a whole and is not dominated by national issues. This can foster the development of a European demos and a European public sphere.

2. The history of the Spitzenkandidaten system

Although the European elections of 2014 are widely considered as the first appearance of the lead candidate system, it was only possible after a long process with important institutional and political incremental changes. The Maastricht Treaty extended the term of the European Commission from four to five years and aligned it with the term of the European Parliament. This was an important prerequisite for the introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system. The parliament was also given the formal competence to vote on the Commission as a whole, further strengthening the political link between the two institutions (although the entire College of Commissioners is expected to be independent and represent all European citizens and not a specific country or (Euro)party). Although not legally required, the parliament also decided to vote on the candidate for Commission, a competence that was eventually codified in the Treaty of Amsterdam.

The Nice Treaty stipulated that the European Council should nominate a candidate for Commission president by qualified majority and not by common accord, as previously included in the treaty text. This lowered the threshold for nomination and took away the veto from the individual heads of state and government (which many leaders had been eager to use in the past). Finally, the Lisbon Treaty added to the specific treaty article that the European Council should “[take] into account the election to the European Parliament and [hold] appropriate consultations” when putting forward a possible Commission president. This new text thus not only strengthened the political ties of the Commission to the investiture of the new European Parliament, but also to the electoral competition that preceded it. The delay of the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty meant that it could not enter into force before the 2009 European elections.

Nevertheless, these elections already signified an important step in the development of the lead candidate process. In the run-up to the 2009 ballot, rep-

resentatives from the main political families aimed to put an end to the dominance of the heads of state and government in the selection of the Commission president and argued that it should not be the result of a backroom deal. Instead, there was a consensus growing that the leader of the EU executive should come from the political family that commanded a majority in the European Parliament. The need to link the Commission leadership to the European elections was evident. However, while the European People’s Party (EPP) proposed José Manuel Barroso for a second term, the PES was not able to nominate a common candidate because of internal disagreements (and consequently, could not present an alternative). These developments show how a favourable institutional context is necessary but not sufficient to enable the development of the lead candidate process, and that the willingness of the party-political elite to support it is also essential to make it work.

3. The Spitzenkandidaten system in practice

The European elections of 2014 were the first time that several European political families put forward their candidates for the presidency of the European Commission (Table 1). The EPP nominated Jean-Claude Juncker, who won the internal vote at the Europarty’s electoral congress against Michel Barnier. The lead candidate of PES, Martin Schulz, came out of the selection process as the natural, sole candidate. In the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party (ALDE), an agreement was reached after a process of mediation, whereby Guy Verhofstadt was put forward as the candidate for the top Commission post and his contender, Olli Rehn, would be the Europarty’s candidate for “another senior position in economic or foreign affairs”. In line with its broader tradition, the European Green Party (EGP) nominated a duo, Ska Keller and José Bové, after a competitive selection process (with Monica Frassoni and Rebecca Harms as other candidates). Finally, the candidate for the Commission presidency of the European Left was Alexis Tsipras.

Table 1. Lead candidates of the various Europarties (2014, 2019, 2024).

	2014	2019	2024
EPP	Jean-Claude Juncker	Manfred Weber	Ursula von der Leyen
PES	Martin Schulz	Frans Timmermans	Nicolas Schmidt
ALDE Party	Guy Verhofstadt	“Team Europe”	Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann & Sandro Gozi
EGP	Ska Keller, José Bové	Ska Keller & Bas Eickhout	Bas Eickhout & Terry Reintke
PEL	Alexis Tsipras	Violeta Tomić & Nico Cué	Walter Baier
EFA	No candidate	Oriol Junqueras	Maylis Rossberg & Raül Romeva
ECR	No candidate	Jan Zahradil	No candidate
ECPM	No candidate	Support for Jan Zahradil	Valeriu Ghilețchi
IDP	No candidate	No candidate	No candidate*

* Anders Vistisen participated in the debate, but not in the capacity of the Europarty’s lead candidate.

From the perspective of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process, these 2014 European elections can be considered a success. The EPP became the largest group in the European Parliament and its candidate, Juncker, was able to quickly secure the support of PES (which had been a vocal proponent of the lead candidate system). Support for Juncker in the European Council was more uncertain, with even members from his own political family – like Angela Merkel – voicing doubts. Members of the European Council were reluctant to support the lead candidate system, as this would substantially limit their influence over filling the post of Commission president. Yet, following substantial public pressure, Juncker was nominated by the heads of state and government and subsequently easily elected by the European Parliament.¹

The 2019 elections, on the other hand, signified an important failure for the lead candidate system. This time, seven Europarties participated by nom-

inating one or more candidate (Table 1). Both the European Free Alliance (EFA) and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) participated for the first time, encouraged by the increased visibility it would bring. The EFA nominated Oriol Junqueras in an attempt to highlight the Catalan cause for more independence. The EGP and the Party of the European Left (PEL) both selected a duo, and the ALDE Party nominated “Team Europe”, consisting of no fewer than seven candidates: Nicola Beer; Emma Bonino; Violeta Bulc; Katalin Cseh; Luis Garicano; Guy Verhofstadt; and Margrethe Vestager. The choice for a group instead of one lead candidate was motivated by the fact that – since the liberals would not be able to become the largest political force – this would delegitimise the lead candidate process as a whole and the candidates of the EPP and PES in particular, and would not jeopardise any possible future collaboration with Emmanuel Macron’s *La République en Marche*, which was sceptical about the *Spitzenkandidaten* process.

1. Put, G. J., S. Van Hecke, C. Cunningham et al. (2016) “The choice of Spitzenkandidaten: A comparative analysis of the Europarties’ selection procedures”. *Politics and Governance*, 1(4), 9-22. DOI: 10.17645/pag.v4i1.469

In addition, it provided the opportunity to present a series of candidates that was balanced in terms of geography, gender and ideology.² Both the EPP and PES put forward one candidate – Manfred Weber and Frans Timmermans – after a competitive internal selection procedure.

In contrast to the previous European elections, the 2019 experience turned out to be a damp squib for the lead candidate system. Already more than a year before the European ballot, European Council President Donald Tusk emphasised that the selection of Jean-Claude Juncker in 2014 did not create an automaticity for the continuation of the lead candidate system. Indeed, the candidate put forward by the European Council was not one of the *Spitzenkandidaten* but Ursula von der Leyen, who had not even participated in the European elections. A number of factors can explain this course of events. Firstly, the heads of state and government in the European Council wanted to preserve as much discretion as possible regarding their choice of Commission president. Secondly, the lead candidate system as such was suffering from scepticism in several political families, not the least the liberals (because of the absence of a pan-European electoral district and transnational lists). Thirdly, the personality traits of the candidate of the largest group, Manfred Weber, failed to convince the European Council (no government experience) and the other political families. Finally, there was a lack of resolve in the European Parliament to reject Ursula von der Leyen as a non-lead candidate (although the vote was close, with only nine surplus votes).³

At the same time, the 2019 experience showed how the lead candidate system is characterized by a delicate political balancing act, and several of the *Spitzenkandidaten* were able to gain an important position: both Frans Timmermans (PES lead candidate) and Margrethe Vestager (part of the ALDE Party's

"Team Europe") became executive Vice-Presidents of the European Commission. In addition, von der Leyen was only able to secure a majority in the European Parliament after making specific policy commitments to the main political groups. Consequently, while the EP did not have one of its preferred candidates as Commission president, it did allow the institution to put a stronger mark on the Commission's policy agenda for the next five years.

The 2024 elections could again be considered a success, at least against the main benchmark of whether a lead candidate can become Commission president. After these last elections, the *Spitzenkandidat* of the EPP – Ursula von der Leyen – secured a second term at the head of the European executive. This time again seven Europarties nominated a lead candidate (Table 1), although only in the EGP was a competitive selection process organised. Although the nomination of von der Leyen could be seen as a victory for the lead candidate system, it by no means constituted institutionalisation of the system and provided no guarantee that this could be repeated with the next European elections in 2029. The *Spitzenkandidaten* process currently suffers from too many challenges to ensure its continuation.

4. The potential and challenges of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system

The *Spitzenkandidaten* system holds a lot of potential, for European political parties in particular, but also for EU democracy at large. It amplifies the role of the Europarties in the political system of the EU: they are the main selection bodies of lead candidates, and consequently, are in a leading position to determine who is taken into consideration for the presidency of the European Commission or other senior EU positions. It also strengthens their role

as campaign organisations, since the Europarties determine and coordinate the electoral campaigns of their lead candidate(s). This more important role can subsequently boost their internal and external visibility. The internal selection of a lead candidate constitutes an opportunity to engage the Europarty members, and the organisation of primaries and high-profile debates between the internal candidates hold the potential to draw a lot of media attention. Similarly, by managing the lead candidate's campaign, the European political parties can have a stronger public presence in the run-up to the European elections and can also draw more attention to their manifestos and main political priorities.

However, past experiences have also shown that the way the lead candidate system has been put into practice has prevented it from living up to its full potential. An important impediment in this regard is the fact that there are no real "European" elections: the campaigns are heavily dominated by national issues and an EU-wide debate on the future of European policy is largely absent. An important reason for this is the institutional framework: there are no pan-European districts in which the European political parties – and their *Spitzenkandidaten* – can compete. Consequently, the national parties are in the driver seat with regard to the campaigns, and the extent to which they refer to – and involve – their Europarty and its lead candidate in their campaign activities differs widely but is overall rather limited. For some of them, their European affiliation is perceived more as a liability than an opportunity, which also explains the strong emphasis on national issues in the campaigns. The European party funding rules also impose severe limitations on joint campaign efforts of European parties and their national member parties.⁴

Other elements hamper the development of an EU-wide campaign for the Europarties' *Spitzenkandidaten* even more. Since electoral and campaign finance law is predominantly a national competence (even in the context of European elections), European political parties are confronted with 27 sets of rules when developing and implementing their

campaign activities. The EU countries differ widely in terms of limitations and bans on certain activities, campaign finance and electoral periods. Furthermore, the funding mechanism at the European level further complicates the development of one EU-wide campaign. Although the European political parties are eligible for substantial public funding, their financial resources are still rather limited for a continent-scale political campaign. In addition, the funding is tied to a co-financing principle; this means that Europarties need to match their subsidies with a certain share of own resources, which creates important internal budgetary pressures when their subsidy amount increases substantially. Since there is no separate campaign grant, financing the electoral activities might also jeopardise the day-to-day operational expenses of the Europarties.

Finally, the positions and actions of the European political parties themselves have also limited the potential of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system. The selection procedures that most Europarties put in place have been rather closed and exclusive: the lead candidate is selected by the Europarty leadership and/or the representatives of the different member states. The individual members of the European or member parties are barely involved, which limits the visibility and engagement such a process might generate among the party rank and file. Furthermore, even among the party elites, support for the *Spitzenkandidaten* system is lukewarm at best. The dominant interpretation of the system that the candidate from the largest group – and not the one that can secure a parliamentary majority – would be entitled to the post of Commission president contributes to this. With such an interpretation, smaller and even medium-sized Europarties have only limited incentives to support the system. The outright scepticism of the heads of state and governments – most of them linked to a European party family – in the European Council further undermines its legitimacy. The uncertainty that the *Spitzenkandidaten* mechanism will be respected discourages high-profile candidates from putting forward their candidacy and shrinks the overall pool of candidates.

2. Cloos, J. (2019) "Spitzenkandidaten: A debate about power and about the future development of the EU". Egmont European Policy Brief no. 56, September, p. 4; W. Wolfs, G. J. Put and S. Van Hecke (2021) "Explaining the reform of the Europarties' selection procedures for Spitzenkandidaten." *Journal of European Integration*, 7(43): 891-914.

3. de Wilde, P (2020) "The fall of the Spitzenkandidaten: Political parties and conflict in the 2019 European elections", in S. Kritzinger, C. Plescia, K. Raube et al. (eds) *Assessing the 2019 European Parliament Elections* (Abingdon: Routledge), pp. 37-53.

4. Wolfs, W. (2022) *European Political Parties and Party Finance Reform* (London: Palgrave MacMillan).

5. Conclusions and recommendations

To reach the full potential of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system for the democratisation of the EU, a number of reforms and changes should be considered. For the European elections, an institutional environment should be created that is conducive to EU-wide campaigns. This includes the introduction of a pan-European electoral district with transnational lists – headed by the various *Spitzenkandidaten* – and the harmonisation of (national) electoral and campaign finances. Such a regulatory framework would facilitate the campaign efforts of the European political parties across the EU and would put European issues at the centre of the electoral competition. In addition, a dedicated campaign fund that is distributed among the different parties would provide them with the necessary resources to finance a true cross-border campaign.

Furthermore, a codification of the lead candidate process would increase the predictability of the implementation of the system. This could increase its appeal to attract a large number of high-profile candidates, which would further make the entire process more competitive and magnify media and public attention. Such a codification can be done through an inter-institutional agreement, an incorporation in the European Electoral Act or through a revision of the treaties.⁵ While this seems a distant reality, there are also measures European political parties can take themselves to improve the *Spitzenkandidaten* process, in particular with regard to their internal selection procedure. Giving individual members – or even citizens more generally – a role in the selection process not only is a good example of participatory democracy, but also has the potential to generate attention and improve the visibility of the candidate(s) and the Europarty more widely. In other words, strengthen EU democracy by making the European political parties more democratic.

5. For more information, see S. Kotanidis (2023) *Spitzenkandidaten or the Lead Candidate Process: Ways to Europeanise elections to the European Parliament* (Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service), pp. 47-58.



4. WHAT NEXT FOR EU PROGRESSIVES AFTER THE CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE?

TIME FOR AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE RIGHT-WING VON DER LEYEN II COMMISSION

Alvaro Oleart

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TIME FOR AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE RIGHT-WING VON DER LEYEN II COMMISSION

Alvaro Oleart

The arrival of the second von der Leyen Commission in 2024 is very different to the first one in 2019. Five years ago, von der Leyen faced a more progressive EP and a legitimacy deficit given her non-Spitzenkandidaten status, and thus had incentives to build a broader coalition with progressive and centrist allies. These actors used this leverage wisely, sending as EU political groups letters to the President-Designate to set the conditions sine qua non for lending their support. Unfortunately, the scenario is very different in 2024, and progressives must act accordingly. While some degree of inter-institutional engagement is necessary - especially to support progressive Commissioners, such as Teresa Ribera -, building an internationalist left-wing alternative to the right-wing von der Leyen II Commission ought to be the horizon, articulating a broad coalition with both institutional and non-institutional progressive actors, including parties, trade unions, civil society and social movements. While the EU political system complicates the establishment of a classic government-opposition relations, progressives have to adapt and strategically reposition themselves to the new scenario where the right has a majority in the Commission, Parliament and Council. This is a necessary stepping stone for regaining the initiative.

A critical analysis of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) is illustrative of the pitfalls that an attempt to strategically maintain a traditional 'pro-European' centrist coalition poses for progressives. This is particularly important in the

context of the radicalisation of the EPP, which has gotten increasingly close to the far right groups in the EP during the November 2024 Commissioner hearings. The S&D group has already responded by arguing that "under the irresponsible behaviour of their group leader Manfred Weber, the conservative EPP broke the historic pro-European, democratic agreement between conservative, social democrat, and liberal groups in this house". In fact, breaking this historic coalition might pave the way for a progressive future. The paper will first describe the CoFoE, then explain the lessons for the European political system from the progressive perspective, and, last, suggest some steps towards building a progressive alternative in the mid and long-term.

1. The CoFoE: Ticking boxes without meaning civil society engagement

When Ursula von der Leyen first pitched her candidacy for president of the European Commission in 2019, she situated "A new push for European democracy" as one of six priorities to convince the newly elected European Parliament to support her, and particularly progressive parties. On European democracy, she situated as her first priority the following: "I want European citizens to play a leading and active part in building the future of our Union. I want them to have their say at a Conference on the Future of Europe, to start in 2020 and

run for two years”. On May 9, 2021, Europe Day, after a one-year delay caused by the outbreak of the pandemic and, even more, by the lack of agreement on the governance structure, EU leaders launched the CoFoE. It was politically led by a joint presidency, and an Executive Board composed of members of the European Commission, the Council of the EU, and the European Parliament, and organisationally by a Common Secretariat that comprised officials from all three institutions. The CoFoE leadership divided the initiative into four main spaces: the multilingual digital platform, decentralised events, the European Citizens’ Panels (ECPs), and the Conference Plenary (for the full analysis of the CoFoE, see Oleart, 2023a).

The CoFoE also encouraged the self-organisation of events. As of April 20, 2022, there had been 6,465 events and 652,532 event participants reported in the Conference platform (CoFoE 2022: 13). The events were organised by mediators such as civil society organisations, yet they were not integrated substantively into the plenary. They were meant to foster debate and conceived of as “public outreach” rather than as means to meaningfully integrate ideas into the plenary (on national parliamentary participation, see Borońska-Hryniewieck and Kinski 2024a).

The ECPs (and also the national citizens’ panels organised by member states¹) were the most innovative aspect. The methodology was constructed by four private subcontractors, consultancies specialised in organising participatory exercises, in constant cooperation with the CoFoE Secretariat. Each of the four panels consisted of 200 randomly selected citizens from all 27 member states. During the panels, the participants deliberated and made recommendations about the policies the EU could take. The different policy areas of the four panels, however, were derived top-down by the CoFoE presidency and the Executive Board, and comprised almost every possible policy area.

1. Six EU member states organised national citizens’ panels that followed the CoFoE criteria: Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Lithuania, and the Netherlands. They had to follow particular criteria set to be officially recognised as CoFoE-related.

In contrast to the focus on randomly selected citizens, civil society organisations were initially not embedded within the Conference plenary. As it was not clear how European civil society organisations would be involved, an important number of EU civil society actors put forward the ‘Civil Society Convention’, which aimed at providing input into the Conference plenary. Once the Civil Society Convention was set in place, the CoFoE leadership invited a limited number of representatives of civil society to the plenary. However, in a public interview, Alexandrina Najmowicz, secretary-general of the European Civic Forum and a member of the CoFoE Plenary, argued:

This lack of recognition has become even more visible and problematic when it comes to the Conference on the Future of Europe, its decision-making process and its functioning... The participation of organized civil society as a channel of mediation is crucial in this regard. At a time when civil society is on the front line in trying to mitigate the disastrous costs of the crisis, we continue to believe that a structured civil dialogue with all civil society actors, in all its social and economic components, is a fundamental element of European democracy... Unfortunately, when we look at the institutional process and all the careful negotiations about empowering citizens to bring about change, the prospects for reinvigorating European democracy from this deliberative process are not very optimistic. (Sestovic 2022)

The Plenary was the main decision-making arena, the space where all the input gathered through the three spaces described above was discussed and deliberated upon. The Plenary was itself divided into nine Working Groups, each dedicated to a different policy area, and it was the WGs that drafted the proposals. The CoFoE formally ended on May 9, 2022, with a final report that contains a set of 49 proposals and 326 measures endorsed by the Conference Plenary (2022b). The final recommen-

dations included some progressive proposals, such as to provide affordable public transport as a means to promote green infrastructure (4); reinforce the healthcare system (8) and provide equal access for all (10), to improve the inclusivity of labour markets (13 and 14); increase the tax capacity of the EU and its member states (16) or to harmonise and improve the socio-economic quality of life of EU citizens (29). However, overall the final recommendations were a catch-all list that mostly reproduced existing discussions in the EU rather than bringing ‘new’ ideas to the table. Representatives from the Commission reported that 80% of their 2023 work program was based on the CoFoE recommendations— however, even if this were true, rather than an illustration of how the Commission has responded, it probably reflects that the recommendations reproduced preexisting hegemonic ideas in the EU. Furthermore, it reproduced problematic relations between EU institutions, Europarties and civil society groups, as the latter are sometimes consulted but rarely followed-up. In this way, the CoFoE ticked the boxes of ‘consulting with EU citizens and civil society’ but without a meaningful and continuous engagement.

2. The role of EU political groups during and after the CoFoE and the institutional “embedding” of citizen participation

In terms of the participation of national parties and EU political groups, the CoFoE did not trigger salient debates across national parliaments, and had a limited degree of politicisation. As argued by Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Lucy Kinski (2024b: 232), “while the CoFoE was mainly used by the pro-EU side of the political spectrum (centre-right, centre, centre left) to pursue reforms aimed at deepening EU integration (except in the Dutch parliament), the more Eurosceptic parties – at least in the EP – used the CoFoE to promote a more “Eurorealist” and sovereigntist vision of the EU”. In practice, this meant that centre-left, liberals and centre-right political groups in the EP co-

operated to advance the powers of the EP vis-à-vis the Council, such as achieving the right to initiate legislation or transnational lists in EU elections. In line with this, as a follow-up to the CoFoE, the European Parliament adopted a resolution in June 2022 calling on the European Council to initiate a process to amend the EU Treaties, as some of the CoFoE proposals required Treaty change.

Progressive MEPs from the S&D and the Greens, such as Domènec Ruiz Devesa or Daniel Freund, were particularly active in advancing the EP institutional agenda, and cooperated closely with MEPs from other pro-European political groups such as Renew and EPP. However, the CoFoE also reproduced a type of political bargaining characterised by inter-institutional negotiations, where the Council was often in the defensive while the EP attempted to deepen integration through giving it more powers, and the Commission positioned itself as a mediator between the two institutions.

Unfortunately, except for the June 2022 resolution by the European Parliament calling for a process to amend EU Treaties, the CoFoE had no meaningful consequence for EU democracy. In fact, the most relevant outcome of the CoFoE was the strengthening of ‘citizen participation’ via sortition and deliberation within the European Commission, a process that I have conceived as the EU’s ‘citizen turn’ (Oleart, 2023b). President von der Leyen announced in her 2022 State of the Union address that the “Citizens’ Panels that were central to the Conference will now become a regular feature of our democratic life”—organised by the Commission alone. It launched a series of five “new generation” ECPs on specific policy topics (food waste, virtual worlds, learning mobility, energy efficiency, and tackling hatred in society) to “embed” participatory democracy within its own policymaking cycle, following the ECP methodology of the CoFoE. Furthermore, in her mission letter to Michael McGrath, the new Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, and the Rule of Law, von der Leyen suggested that “this Commission will start a new era of dialogue with citizens and stakeholders (...) We will build on the Conference on the Future of Europe

to instil a true and lasting culture of participative democracy. We will choose policy areas and proposals where recommendations from a European Citizens Panel would have the greatest value and follow up on their proposals”.

This direction is thus likely to continue, even though the sidelining of collective actors failed in its attempt to democratise the EU in any meaningful way. Progressives have thus little to gain from these processes, as the CoFoE has shown that current EU participatory exercises do little to cultivate spaces for collective action and dissensus, where progressive priorities can be advanced. The distance of the EU's politics from national political debates is a major challenge, as a stronger EU democracy requires the joint development of stronger collective actors at the national and transnational level. This entails a broader reconfiguration of how EU democracy is conceived, as it needs stronger horizontal connections (between parties and trade unions in different member states) and vertical ones (between national and EU-level political parties), as well as more links to civil society and activists beyond the EU.

3. What next after the CoFoE for EU progressives?

The current state of play of EU politics is very grim for progressives: a right-wing majority in the EP with an important component of far right MEPs, a majority of conservative governments in EU Member states and, in consequence, a very right-wing Commission led (again) by Ursula von der Leyen. Furthermore, a second Trump presidency will add pressure on EU policy-makers from the US to shift further right. However, it also opens the possibility to break away from the traditional Grand Coalition that dominates EU politics where centre-left S&D, Liberals and centre-right EPP tend to agree on major EU political and policy decisions. Against this background, for far too long, academics, politicians and journalists have peddled the myth that the best way to advance 'progressive' policies in

the EU is through pacts with Liberals and Conservatives in the form of a 'pro-European' Grand Coalition. But what if this way of conceiving EU politics is part of the problem and not the solution? Perhaps a better suited understanding of European politics currently is to forget about the 'pro-Europeans vs Eurosceptics' framework, and focus instead on countering austerity policies, the EU's racist migration and asylum restrictions or the support for Israeli apartheid, occupation and massacre against Palestinians.

Given the unfavourable institutional power relations in the EU, progressives would do well to start doing what has never been done in EU politics before: build an actual pan-European left-wing alternative to the right-wing von der Leyen Commission II. 'Alternative' is not exactly an 'opposition', as agreements and engagement with the Commission will still be necessary, but certainly a much tougher position towards it. The president of the Commission will say that she prefers to maintain the Grand Coalition but, if the S&D does not go along with it, she might make an agreement with the far right of Meloni, Le Pen and Orban. Progressives should let her do that: if von der Leyen is going to continue advancing right-wing policies (such as the 2024 EU Migration Pact, which more than 160 civil society organisations called to be voted down), she better do so with the support of the far right. Some agreements might be possible to reduce the damage of vdL's agenda and support the few progressive Commissioners, but the overall conception should be one of being in opposition. Otherwise, the 'progressives' will contribute to advance a right-wing political agenda, and also risk to follow the electoral decline that social-democrats have experienced every time they have turned to the right.

Pushing for a CoFoE-like process in this context would thus be contradictory to pursuing progressive priorities, as it entails entering an inter-institutional bargaining process where progressives are likely to lose. Instead, the emphasis and attention should be placed in self-organising beyond the institutional framework through the construction

of spaces of transnational struggle, thinking in a medium to long-term perspective. In this way, a crucial battleground for the future of transnational democracy is the construction of mass membership organisations, in order to redress the hollowing out described by Peter Mair (2013). Collective organisations allow citizens to come together in a particular ideological direction, and bringing mass politics to the EU level can better connect progressives "in the corridors and in the streets" (Parks, 2015).

Thus, while institutional reforms, such as a greater emphasis on the role of the EP and national parliaments in EU policy and decision-making is desirable (see Crum & Oleart, 2023), they alone are no silver bullet for the democratisation of the EU. In this sense, there has been much enthusiasm within the European Parliament for the development of 'transnational lists' for European elections. While transnational lists certainly go in the good direction to encourage the Europeanisation of parties, it is not going to make a big difference given that EU political groups are not mass membership parties. Arguably, that is why the Spitzenkandidaten failed in 2019 (and arguably also in 2024): it is not anchored in mass politics. Constructing reforms uniquely 'from above', such as the Spitzenkandidaten, transnational lists or the European Citizen Panels of the CoFoE, will not meaningfully contribute to democratise EU politics.

Thus, rather than a new CoFoE, progressives should start devoting its energy in self-organising together with trade unions, civil society and social movements to build an internationalist left-wing alternative to vdL II. A concrete way forward can build on previous initiatives, and operate in at least three different dimensions. In the EP, progressive MEPs can revitalise the Progressive Caucus to coordinate with pro-European progressive allies from the Left and the Greens. This can empower progressives not as a single political group, but as a plural and diverse political force across different groups that should be more closely aligned together. Transnationally, building on the 2021 Global Progressive Forum, linking with progres-

sive actors beyond the EU is crucial, particularly in the context of a second 'geopolitical Commission'. Such space could incorporate actors such as Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum, Colombian President Gustavo Petro or US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, as well as Global Souths civil society, in an attempt to align progressive priorities and networks transnationally. And it should not be a one-off, but a continuous engagement. Third, progressives should regain the ideational initiative by putting forward paradigm changes such as the 2023 Beyond Growth Conference. This strategy is oriented not so much at making modest policy changes to the von der Leyen II agenda (which might still be possible and necessary), but rather to set the future agenda. These dimensions would be oriented to, first, build an effective alternative (even if it would remain in a minority on the short term) and, second, to think beyond the von der Leyen II Commission and prioritise the articulation of an effective alternative in the medium and longer term.

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5. A NEW ELECTORAL SYSTEM FOR A LARGER EUROPE: THE EUROPEAN-WIDE ELECTORAL CONSTITUENCY

Domènec Ruiz Devesa

5. A NEW ELECTORAL SYSTEM FOR A LARGER EUROPE: THE EUROPEAN-WIDE ELECTORAL CONSTITUENCY

Domènec Ruiz Devesa

The overall institutional dimension

The IX legislature (2019-2024) ended with four important unfinished pieces of business of institutional nature, namely, the right of inquiry of parliament, the new European electoral law, the Regulation on Political Parties and Foundations, and the reform of the treaties; all four are related to the democratic core of Europe. In addition, it is necessary to update the Inter-Institutional Agreement of 2010 between Parliament and Commission in order to improve accountability and scrutiny and inquiry powers.

It is now the duty of the new parliament, and in particular, its pro-European majority, to keep up the fight for these files, which must be completed way ahead of the 2029 elections. In fact, the Cooperation Platform for the X mandate, signed by three political forces (EPP, S&D, and Renew Europe) on 20th November 2024, states that “we commit to advance necessary reforms, including Treaty changes towards an ‘ever closer union’ and ensure the best representation possible of EU citizens. We will continue to protect and promote Parliament prerogatives, in particular through the newly negotiated framework agreement”. Progressive forces must be in the lead for a stronger transnational European democracy, particularly in a context in which right-wing politicians have increased their power in the European Parliament, Council and Commission.

The first dossier is very old; it was approved by parliament in 2012. It aims to develop a legal base of the Lisbon Treaty, with a view of updating the 1995 framework on the powers of parliament to set up committees of inquiry. The Council has refused to

open negotiations on the file up to now. Parliament has decided to include some elements of the file in its own Rules of Procedure (this was done at the end of the IX mandate), and to propose its inclusion in the reformed Inter-Institutional Agreement.

After lengthy negotiations, the proposal for a new European electoral law was adopted by Parliament in May 2022, with the support of S&D, Renew Europe, Greens, the Left, and sizable portion of EPP. The plenary vote on the report as a whole passed by about sixty votes. It proposes, for the first time, the creation of a pan-European electoral constituency of limited size, among other novelties. In this case, the Council has refused to open negotiations with parliament, arguing, among other things, that the 2024 election was already too close to find a political agreement and lack of a common approach.

The proposed Regulation on European Political Parties and Foundations is in trilogue negotiations between Parliament, Council, and Commission, and the agreement is within reach. The sticky issues have regarded the financing system (The Rapporteur from EPP Rainer Wieland insisted switching from seats to votes as the basis for the calculation) and the participation of non-EU parties in the European Political Parties.

Regarding the proposal from parliament to reform the Lisbon Treaty, adopted in November 2023, the European Council has yet to even acknowledge it, let alone discuss the matter or deliver a reply. The proposed amendments to the treaties seek to endow parliament with the direct right of legislative initiative, empower it to co-decide on taxation and

debt with the council, and to expand the use of qualified majority voting in this second institution. The question of overcoming unanimity in the council is fundamental, in view of the relaunching of the enlargement dynamic.

It is obvious that all four files are in regards to, to different degrees, the powers of parliament (how members of the European Parliament are elected, the right of legislative initiative, the right of inquiry, powers over debt emissions and taxes, among others), and therefore, to the strength of European democracy, including participation, quality and relevance of the electoral process.

The overall question is do Member States plan to leave the powers and prerogatives of the European Parliament static in view of the more prominent role of the Commission, with the new policies launched to face the different crises, and the relaunching of the enlargement dynamic? Shall we have an enlarged Europe but not a stronger European parliamentary democracy? These institutional questions must be finally addressed in the 2024-2029 legislature, in view of the observed trend by the Council and the European Council to overlook and procrastinate institutional dilemmas across the board.

A new electoral law with transnational lists

The current European Electoral Act dates back to 1976. It has been reformed just once, in the early 2000s, in relatively minor aspects. The first proposal for the creation of a transnational constituency was launched in 1999. There were two other attempts at introducing it with the Duff I and Duff II reports, at the end of the 7th legislature, but none of them managed to garner majority support in the plenary of the European Parliament. In 2015 Parliament adopted the Hubner/Leinen report for the reform of the European Electoral Act, which included a reference to the future establishment of such a constituency by a unanimous decision of the Council. However, in 2018 EPP decided to backtrack on

the proposal, and voted it down in the report regarding the composition of the European Parliament, which resulted in its removal from the final text. In consequence, Council did not include the idea in its version of the reformed Electoral Act. The amendments adopted in 2018 are still not in force due to the lack of ratification by Spain, since it included a new mandatory threshold between 2 and 5 per cent that it is problematic for several regionalist parties represented in the national parliament.

At the beginning of the X Legislature, Parliament decided to propose an entirely new Act to replace the one adopted in 1976 in order to include several innovations and endow it with a more systematic structure, which was adopted in May 2023. For the first time, Parliament backed a concrete design for a transnational electoral college. It is therefore crucial to start negotiations between the Parliament and Council in earnest, to have the law ready for implementation in the 2029 elections. The procedure is already very difficult. Once parliament makes a proposal, the council must reach unanimous agreement (also on a modified version), send it back to parliament and, if approved, all member states must ratify it.

The new proposal by parliament includes many novelties, such as the establishment of the European-wide electoral college, mandatory gender representation, a voting age of 16 years, a common election day, improvement to the rights of persons with disabilities, the obligation of offering postal voting, and more common standards (timeline of the campaign period, etc.).

The introduction of the transnational college is unavoidable to raise interest and the participation of voters in European elections; improve the quality of the electoral process, including its focus on European affairs; strengthen European political parties; and give proper awareness and credibility to the *Spitzenkandidaten* process. It is the overall political direction of the European integration process that is at stake: more or less conservative/neoliberal/progressive/green, etc. We need a program and a lead candidate at the European level that it is known by

the general public and not only by the main players of the European ecosystem of power.

The European elections suffer from considerably lower turnout compared with national elections. Often, citizens consider them as less relevant than national, or even regional and local, elections, and national parties largely consider that they are a way to test the relative strength of government and opposition parties, also as polling for the next “real” election.

The focus of the campaign remains predominantly domestic, with a set of 27 parallel national elections, rather than a pan-European process focused on transnational topics to which citizens can relate from Lisbon to Helsinki (climate change, security, trade, digitalisation, etc.). European political parties are almost absent from the process, which is quite paradoxical, since we are talking of elections to the European Parliament. Their names and logos mostly feature nowhere, except at a few rallies; they are nowhere to be found on campaign advertisements (posters, banners) nor on the ballots themselves. Their candidates for Commission president almost never feature in campaign imagery at the national level. In general, this is already possible, except in a few Member States due to the legal framework. However, there is very low intake/ownership by national political parties of the European political parties’ brands in the electoral campaign to the European Parliament, while EU parties do not have the power to impose its use. Experience so far shows that stronger use by national parties is not a realistic perspective without a change in the European electoral framework that forces a new dynamic, this is, the need to campaign for a European-level list.

Currently, the power to table candidates is entirely in the hands of national parties, whose procedures to nominate candidates are often less than democratic, hazardous and based on internal party equilibria instead of merit, knowledge, competence and the set of skills required to operate effectively in European politics. European political parties play no role whatsoever in the design of national party lists: a concurrent issue is the evolution of Euro-

pean political parties from a loose confederation of national parties to federal parties endowed with stronger leadership.

The proposed transnational electoral constituency can contribute to raising interest (and therefore participation) and improving the quality of the electoral process, which in the current legislative proposal is composed of 28 seats, in addition to the existing national constituencies. The European political parties will be able to table a set of 28 candidates from different member states, respecting a strict rule of territorial balance. The lists will be closed and blocked, since a preferential vote will have the potential to nullify the said balance. Seats are to be allocated proportionally relative to the votes obtained, in accordance with the D’Hondt mathematical formula. The European citizens will be more empowered because now they have two votes, and the possibility to express a preference not only for a national party, but also for a European political family, thereby endorsing directly a political direction, an electoral program and a candidate for Commission president.

This proposal has a number of practical advantages. It is innovative but not wholly disruptive, since the large majority of seats will still be elected on a national basis (28 out of, currently, 720, or 3.8% of the total). It does not require further harmonisation of national electoral systems, since standardisation is self-contained in the transnational constituency itself. The use of closed and blocked party lists makes it simple to understand and apply.

In purely political terms, this additional set of transnational candidates will have to campaign across member states to gather votes for their list, thus not only in their respective member states. This has the potential to create a new layer of transnational campaigning, over and above the domestic dynamics.

Secondly, the European political parties are further empowered and made more visible. They will be in charge of composing and brokering the transnational list in negotiations with national affiliates. This will end the current monopoly of national parties

over the selection of the European political personnel, but also strengthen the federal character of the European political parties. Moreover, there will be added (and welcome) visibility, since they will conduct the campaigning for the European-wide constituency, using their names and logos on electoral advertisements, and will also be featured on the ballot papers.

Thirdly, the *Spitzenkandidaten* principle, by which European political parties table candidates for Commission president, will become more realistic, since they will typically lead their respective transnational list to the European Parliament (even if it is not legally required in Parliament's proposal). The experience of the lead candidate process is mixed.

In 2014 it worked, with Jean Claude Juncker becoming President of the Commission after its designation by the EPP Congress as its candidate, (even if did not run for a seat), the centre-right party became the largest political force in the European Parliament, and without the possibility of forming an alternative majority.

In 2019, lead candidates Weber from the EPP and Timmermans from S&D (who also ran for seats in their home constituencies) failed to get the support from the European Council to be proposed to Parliament. In the end the European Council proposed Von der Leyen, who had not even been a candidate for the European Parliament, which constituted to many a big disappointment. This contributed to re-open the debate about the transnational list as the only possible device to sustain *Spitzenkandidaten*.

In the 2024 European elections, lead candidates, such as von der Leyen or Schmit, did not run on a national list, but at least Von der Leyen returned as Commission President. In fact, their place is more logically found in the lead position of a transnational list tabled by the European political family that designated them as candidates for the presidency of the Commission. As a result, their name will be included on an electoral ballot available in all member states, alongside their image in the campaign materials. The lead candidates will be finally known

across all member states. This is what can in fact permanently consolidate the system of lead candidates, even if parliamentary majorities could also be formed around, for instance, the second most voted lead candidate.

Finally, the proposed system is essential given the fact that European public opinion is undeveloped with regard to the national one (lack of common media read in all member states, Schmit common European citizenship education, etc.). Complementary efforts in these other domains can have a multiplier effect with regard to the proposed electoral reform.

Favourable Member States in the Council must take the lead to make tangible progress in this proposal.



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THE GREAT COUNTDOWN: A GUIDE ON HOW TO ARRIVE PREPARED FOR THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS 2029

The 2024 European Elections were a defining moment, shaping the trajectory of European integration. Yet, as the newly elected Parliament began its work and governance mechanisms fell into place, the opportunity for reflection on this vital exercise in participatory democracy risked being overlooked.

This policy study bridges that gap, presenting a comprehensive analysis of the elections, their impact, and the lessons they offer for shaping a more inclusive, effective democratic process in the years ahead. Built on the innovative “Living up to, not leaving aside” project, this compendium combines pioneering research, expert debates, and real-world insights to inform and inspire the path toward the 2029 elections.

Key contributions examine the crafting and dissemination of European manifestoes, the evolving role of Spitzenkandidaten, and the coordination within europarties. These analyses not only diagnose existing challenges but also propose actionable reforms to strengthen the EU’s democratic processes and citizen engagement.

The Great Countdown is a call to action for progressives, policymakers, and all advocates of democracy to seize the momentum of electoral cycles. With the lessons of 2024 as a foundation, it challenges decision-makers to push boundaries, innovate, and set ambitious goals for preserving and advancing democracy in Europe. The countdown to 2029 has already begun—will we rise to the challenge?

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