

Titel:

The Second Time Around: Status quo and Reform of the Europarties' Selection Procedures for Spitzenkandidaten in 2019

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Kurzzusammenfassung

In the run-up to the 2019 European elections, the Europarties put forward lead candidates for the presidency of the European Commission. These *Spitzenkandidaten* were at the forefront of their electoral campaigns. This chapter focuses on how five Europarties – European People's Party, Party of European Socialists, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party, European Green Party, European Left – selected their lead candidates and how these procedures have changed compared to the 2014 European elections. The results suggest that the Europarties only made relatively small procedural changes, which did not contribute to the sustainability of the Spitzenkandidaten system.

Schlagworte

candidate selection, European elections, Spitzenkandidaten, European political parties, Europarties

1. Introduction

Strasbourg, 15 July 2014: the European Parliament (EP) elects Jean-Claude Juncker as the new president of the European Commission. Juncker had been the *Spitzenkandidat* or lead candidate in the electoral campaign of the European People's Party (EPP) for the preceding European elections. The Spitzenkandidaten system envisaged to create a more genuine electoral contest, where European voters were offered a choice between lead candidates representing the European parties' alternative political visions.¹ In the run-up to the 2014 EP elections, the main parties developed internal procedures to select their candidates. Due to time constraints, the design of these selections was largely copy-paste from the Europarties' leadership selections (Put et al. 2016).

¹ We use both the terms *Europarties* and *European parties* to refer to the political parties at European level: the extraparlimentary party organizations to be distinguished from the political groups in the European Parliament.

This chapter analyzes whether and how European parties have changed their selection procedures for the 2019 EP elections. Drawing on the seminal model of Rahat and Hazan (2001), we compare these procedures on four analytical dimensions both between parties and over time. The analysis is based on semi-structured interviews with members of the Europarties' leadership, and party documents of the EPP, the Party of European Socialists (PES), the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) Party, the European Green Party (EGP) and the European Left (EL). These are the five parties who selected a lead candidate both for the 2014 and 2019 EP elections and for which we can provide a cross-temporal comparison of procedures. The two Europarties that nominated a Spitzenkandidat for the first time in 2019, the Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe (ACRE) and the European Free Alliance (EFA), therefore fall outside of the chapter's scope.

2. The first time around: Evaluation of the Spitzenkandidaten process in 2014

Although the 2014 EP elections' Spitzenkandidaten presented a landmark for EU electoral politics, the idea of European parties selecting directly competing candidates was not new (e.g. Hix 1998). Proponents of this process echoed some of the classical arguments in favor of institutional innovations to overcome the EU's democratic deficit.

The *direct* election of the Commission presidency would substantially raise the stakes of the EP elections, thereby increasing media attention and citizen involvement. Moreover, the Europarties would be able to engage in actual inter-party competition at the EU level, adding a European dimension as counterweight to the second-order nature of the EP elections (Hix & Marsh 2011). Finally, and most importantly, advocates were also hopeful that the Spitzenkandidaten process would result in a higher turnout, reversing the declining turnout rates of previous EP elections and boosting the legitimacy of EU institutions.

However, empirical work shows that few voters were aware of specific candidate names for the Commission presidency (Hobolt 2014), and that the Spitzenkandidaten's visibility during the campaign was relatively limited (Schulze 2016). The expectation that turnout would increase after decades of decreasing electoral participation was not met (van der Brug et al. 2016). Christiansen (2016) argues that the Spitzenkandidaten process did not lead to higher levels of party-political competition, as the long-standing *grand coalition* in the EP between the EPP and PES was actually strengthened.

Arguably, the selection procedures designed by Europarties to put forward their lead candidate in 2014 did not contribute to candidate recognition and public excitement either. As the parties' final decision on a lead candidate only took place on short notice before the EP election, these candidates lacked the time to run professional campaigns. Moreover, while the literature argues that democratic intra-party primaries yield stronger media coverage (Rahat & Hazan 2001), four of the five participating parties opted for a selection mechanism using delegates (Put et al. 2016). Even though these delegates gathered at large electoral congresses, such a procedure has less potential to draw public interest than for instance an open primary election, which only the EGP organized.

Although the Spitzenkandidaten system was not a genuine game-changer for the EP election campaign, EU scholars agree that this experiment had crucial implications from the inter-institutional viewpoint (Hobolt 2014; Christiansen 2016). As the EP succeeded to impose its own candidate on the European Council after the elections, the outcome was considered a success. The 2019 EP election was more than once dubbed as the real litmus test for the system, allowing European parties more time to prepare professional campaigns and real intra-party contests based on institutionalized selection processes (Christiansen 2016; Braun & Popa 2018).

3. The second time around: comparison of Europarties' selection procedures

In what follows, we provide a between-party and over time comparison of Europarties' selection procedures for lead candidates. The analysis of the 2019 procedures and their comparison with 2014 is organized around the four candidate selection dimensions of the model developed by Rahat and Hazan (2001): candidacy, selectorate, decentralization and voting/appointment systems.

3.1 Candidacy

The first dimension describes the requirements that need to be fulfilled to get nominated as a lead candidate. These requirements range from highly exclusive where strict rules regarding, for instance, party membership, seniority or degree of intra-party support are imposed, to highly inclusive where no restrictions on potential Spitzenkandidaten are defined.

We find that candidacy requirements were reformed in four of the five Europarties. The EPP is the sole party that applied identical restrictions in 2019 and 2014: a candidate required the formal support of his or her own national party and a maximum of two additional member

parties from other EU countries. Only the presidents or the secretary-generals of the member parties were entitled to nominate or endorse a candidate (EPP 2018a). The ceiling of three supporting member parties was chosen deliberately to avoid a race between the candidates to gain the support of as many member parties as possible (Put et al. 2016, 14; Interview A).

Both the EGP and PES raised the threshold for candidatures in 2019. As concerns the EGP, the selection procedure took place in two steps. First, candidates could be nominated by their own party. Interestingly, national parties were also allowed to put forward non-members as candidates (EGP 2018, p. 1). Then, in a second step, the candidates had two weeks to gain the support of five additional member parties. Green member parties were allowed to support two candidates. In 2014, candidates were required to collect support from at least four and maximum eight member parties. The new 2019 threshold of five member parties apart from the nominating party was seen as a good balance between fostering competition and preventing individuals to participate simply to advance their own career (Interview D).

PES increased the threshold for candidatures from 15% of the member parties in 2014 to 25% in 2019 (PES 2011, p. 2; PES 2018, p. 2). Since a member party or organisation could only support one candidate, this meant in practice that the support of 9 parties or organisations was required (PES 2018, p. 2). The higher threshold was installed to limit the risk of intra-party divisions, and to make sure that only *serious* candidates that already enjoyed substantial support within the party put forward their candidature (Interview B).

While the ALDE party initially intended to copy-paste its 2014 selection procedure, intra-party support grew to move away from *one* lead candidate. Instead, the European liberals put forward a diverse group of people to show the *different facets of European liberalism*, an idea first proposed at the ALDE summit of prime ministers and Commissioners (Interview C). During the ALDE Party Council Meeting in Madrid in November 2018, the formal decision was taken to conduct an electoral campaign with a full *team* of candidates. The task to compose this group of candidates was delegated to the ALDE Party President (Interview C). In terms of candidacy requirements, ALDE moved away from asking candidates to find the support by at least two member parties (from different countries) or 20% of congress delegates. Instead, the liberal *Team Europe* consisted of a group of seven politicians balanced in terms of region, policy expertise, gender and other sociodemographic characteristics.

In case of the European Left, no support of any of the member parties was required. Moreover, no formal candidacy requirements were put in place (Interview E), which explains why Nico

Cué, head of a Belgian trade union – without formal ties to any European Left member party – could become one of the two Europarty’s lead candidates.

3.2 Selectorate

The selectorate dimension asks the question of who selects the candidates. Similar to candidacy, a selectorate can range from the inclusive end where the party membership or even the electorate selects, to the exclusive end where a small intra-party group or a single leader selects. As Europarties do not have individual citizens as members in a similar way as national parties (Put et al. 2016), they are more constrained in terms of selectorate inclusiveness, not being able to organize general membership primaries.

Europarties can, however, organize open primaries by granting European citizens voting rights in their selection procedure as the EGP did in 2014. All other parties organized a selection via member party delegates at an electoral congress. In 2019, all Europarties relied on a similar selectorate body of delegates representing the various member parties.

Within the EGP, the use of an online open primary was evaluated positively in terms of procedure, but the participation rate (22 676 voters) had been disappointing (EGP 2014, p. 1). For the 2019 elections, the use of an open online primary was reconsidered, but the EGP leadership held the opinion that it could not be successful without the active engagement of the member parties. During preparatory meetings for the 2019 elections, it became clear that the support of the member parties for another online primary was low, so a new procedure had to be developed (Interview D). The EGP selection largely mimicked the competitors’ procedures (EGP 2018, pp. 1-2).

As in 2014, both the EPP and PES organized an electoral congress to decide on the new lead candidate. The EPP selectorate consisted of a total of 758 delegates of the 49 EPP member parties, 6 associate member parties, 6 member associations, 14 individual MEPs and delegations from European and international institutions (EPP 2018b). As regards the PES, the lead candidate nomination took place on the PES Election Congress, where all member parties and organisations had a number of delegates depending on their representation in the EP and national parliament, and the size of the country (PES 2015, p. 8-9).

While the ALDE party selected Guy Verhofstadt as their 2014 lead candidate at an electoral congress, the proposed *Team Europe* selected by ALDE President van Baalen was this time formally endorsed by the ALDE Party Council which was similarly composed of party delegates (ALDE 2019). Finally, whereas the EL had selected their lead candidate during their

triennial congress in 2014, the two candidates in 2019 were selected during an Executive Board meeting. This Board brings together the presidency and two (gender-balanced) representatives from each member party (EL 2018). Consequently, the EL selectorate was substantially more exclusive.

3.3 Decentralization

Territorial decentralization in candidate selection processes measures the role of regional, local or other subnational party levels. Within Europarties, national member parties can be considered regional branches with varying influence in lead candidate selections. In 2014, the majority of Europarties took the demographic weight of member states into account to determine the number of party delegates per member party. The only exceptions were the EGP online primary which did not take into account any demographics, and the EL selection, in which 12 delegates for each member party chose the lead candidate.

The EPP reused a system where the number of votes for member parties is determined by the results of the last EP election. The PES also implemented the same level of decentralization as in 2014, taking into account the member party's strength in national parliaments, the EP and the countries' demographic size. The selectorate change of the EL did not affect decentralization levels, as every member party has the same number of delegates, regardless of electoral results or demographic weight.

Both ALDE and EGP changed decentralization levels in their procedures. Whereas ALDE previously assigned votes to member party delegations based on national party strength, in 2019 the European liberals opted for a vote distribution depending on the member party's result in the last EU elections, which can be considered a subtle centralization in its selection procedure. Finally, as the EGP stepped away from their online primary selection towards delegate selection in 2019, their party elite had to develop new rules on the distribution of votes towards member delegations. Specifically, the number of votes for member parties was now based on a combination of party strength in the EP and national parliament.

3.4 Voting/appointment systems

While in voting systems candidates are selected using a voting procedure of which the results are afterwards presented, a pure appointment system implies that candidates are appointed with no need for approval by any party agency (Rahat & Hazan 2001). In 2014, all Europarties implemented voting procedures with differing majority requirements. An aspirant EPP candidate needed an absolute majority of valid votes by EPP delegates to become the lead candidate in 2014, which was also the needed majority in 2019. The PES procedure loosened

its requirements from a qualified majority of PES delegates to an absolute majority of valid votes by PES delegates, organized over two rounds if necessary.

The ALDE substantially lowered the required majority threshold for the approval of its Team Europe at the Party Council. Only a simple majority with a minimum of 1/3 delegates present sufficed. Before the Liberals had decided to launch a team of Spitzenkandidaten, the plan was to copy-paste the selection procedure of 2014 which included an absolute majority requirement at the electoral congress. The Greens decided to tighten up their majority requirements for the selection of two winning candidates. Whereas in 2014 only a relative majority of the electorate was required, this was raised to an absolute majority of the votes cast at the EGP Council. The voting requirements for the EL were not substantially changed: as in 2014, a simple majority with the majority of the members present was required.

3.5 Overview

Table 1 presents an overview of the 2019 procedures for the selection of Spitzenkandidaten. Each row compares the Europarties' procedures on one of the four dimensions. Moreover, each cell explains how the corresponding Europarty has changed that particular dimension vis-à-vis 2014. The final row shows each party's lead candidate(s) and their intra-party competitors who's candidacies were unsuccessful.

Table 1: Selection Procedures to nominate the Spitzenkandidaten of the EPP, PES, ALDE Party, EGP and EL in 2019, and changes vis-à-vis 2014

	EPP	PES	ALDE	EGP	EL
Candidacy	Support by own national party + maximum two other member parties IDENTICAL	Support by 25% of full member parties or organizations (incl. own party or other party from own country) MORE EXCLUSIVE	Contributing to balanced profile of lead candidate team MORE EXCLUSIVE	Nomination by one party and additional support of at least five additional member parties MORE EXCLUSIVE	No specific candidacy requirements MORE INCLUSIVE
Selectorate	EPP delegates at electoral congress IDENTICAL	PES delegates at electoral congress IDENTICAL	ALDE Party Council Members (also delegates) IDENTICAL	EGP Council Members MORE EXCLUSIVE	EL Executive Board Members MORE EXCLUSIVE
Decentralization	Number of votes for member parties: three + number depending on result in last European election	Number of votes for member parties based on party strength in national and EP, and country size	Number of votes depends on party result in last EU elections	Number of votes for member parties based on party strength in national parliament and EP	Equal number of votes for each member party

	IDENTICAL	IDENTICAL	MORE CENTRALIZED	MORE DECENTRALIZED	IDENTICAL
Voting or appointment procedures	Absolute majority of valid votes by EPP delegates (abstentions not valid)	Absolute majority of valid votes by PES delegates (in two rounds if necessary)	Simple majority with minimum 1/3 of delegates present	Absolute majority of votes	Simple majority with majority of members present
	IDENTICAL	REDUCED CONTROL	REDUCED CONTROL	ENHANCED CONTROL	IDENTICAL
Outcome	- Manfred Weber - Alexander Stubb	- Frans Timmermans - Maros Sefcovic	- Nicola Beer - Emma Bonino - Violeta Bulc - Katalin Cseh - Luis Garicano - Guy Verhofstadt - Margrethe Vestager	- Bas Eickhout - Ska Keller - Petra De Sutter - Atanas Schmidt	- Nico Cue - Violeta Tomic

Source: Illustrated by authors

4. Conclusion

This chapter compared the Europarties' procedures for the selection of a lead candidate at the occasion of the 2019 EP elections and analyzed how these have changed compared with 2014. Whereas the EPP copy-pasted its 2014 procedure and PES mainly introduced technical changes, the EL has made its procedure slightly more exclusive. The EGP initiated a more fundamental reform by abandoning its online primary and adopting a more exclusive procedure similar to its competitors. The procedure followed by the ALDE party was also different from the first selection in 2014, but the major change for the Liberals was clearly the outcome of selecting a team. Whereas the different parties' procedures were already highly similar back in 2014 save the EGP online primary, the 2019 selection procedures seem to have converged even more. Our results suggest that Europarties' internal practices are *sticky*, even though the procedures in place have been developed *ad hoc* and on extremely short notice before the 2014 elections.

The least reformed aspect of candidate selection is the selectorate, which is often considered to have the strongest impact in terms of public perception and engagement. This begs the question of how fundamental the identified procedural reforms should be considered. For instance, changes in candidacy requirements are often implemented for managing intra-party competition at early stages of the selection process and are not likely to affect the institutionalization of the Spitzenkandidaten system substantially. In that sense, the analysis of the 2019 Spitzenkandidaten selections do not provide evidence that Europarties instrumentalized their internal procedures to make the system *incontournable* for the nomination of the Commission

Presidency. At least the changes of 2019 do not seem to have been introduced to make the Spitzenkandidaten system more sustainable.

Ironically, the selection of Ursula von der Leyen in 2019 as the new Commission President has caused a major blow to the current system. Some have even proclaimed the end of the Spitzenkandidaten system, including Jean-Claude Juncker himself: “I was the first and last Spitzenkandidat” (EurActiv, 5 July 2019). It is not yet clear, however, whether the whole system is dead as von der Leyen has announced a reform of the current selection process: “I want us to work together to improve the Spitzenkandidaten system. We need to make it more visible to the wider electorate (...)” (European Commission, 2019). The system certainly has its flaws and there is a lot of room for improvement (Van Hecke et al., 2018). It remains to be seen, however, if those future changes will also affect the Europarties’ internal selection procedures. With a focus on the European institutions rather than the Europarties it is likely that 2024, similar to 2019, will signify a status quo rather than a reform.

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Appendix: list of semi-structured interviews with Policy Advisors undertaken in the framework of this chapter

Interview A: European People's Party (EPP) in Brussels, 16 April 2019.

Interview B: Party of European Socialists (PES) in Leuven, 4 June 2019.

Interview C: Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party (ALDE Party) in Brussels, 27 March 2019.

Interview D: European Green Party (EGP) in Brussels, 31 January 2019.

Interview E: European left (EL), Telephone Interview, 28 October 2019.

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