

POLITICAL GROUPS AND SPITZENKANDIDATEN IN THE 2014 ELECTIONS FOR THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

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Abstract

The academic literature on the issue of democracy in the European Union includes various calls for a bolder personalization of the electoral competition, in order to improve citizen participation. Frequently associated with the debates on the so-called “democratic deficit” of the EU, these approaches generally provide several other recommendations leading to a more majoritarian type of government for the European polity.

The entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, in December 2009, strengthened the European Parliament’s position in the EU political system and gave a new impetus to the pro-integration forces operating within it. While asserting its new role as the EU body enjoying the highest degree of direct democratic legitimacy, the European Parliament found itself in a favorable position to challenge an important prerogative of the EU’s primary inter-governmental body, the European Council: the decisive input in the process of nominating the European Commission president.

The European political groups had surprisingly different reactions to the new institutional framework. The three political families that had so far dominated EU politics produced fairly conventional – though by no means similar – responses, while the smaller groups, with the exception of the far left, opted for less conventional ones.

Keywords: European Union, European Parliament, elections, political groups, Spitzenkandidat

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Introduction

The academic literature on the issue of democracy in the European Union includes various calls for a bolder personalization of the electoral competition, in order to improve citizen participation. Frequently associated with the debates on the so-called “democratic deficit” of the EU, these approaches generally provide several other recommendations leading to a more majoritarian type of government for the European polity.

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The new form of Art. 17 (7) of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) Treaty of Lisbon provided: “Taking into account the elections to the European Parliament and after having held the appropriate consultations, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall propose to the European Parliament a candidate for President of the Commission. This candidate shall be elected by the European Parliament by a majority of its component members. If he does not obtain the required majority, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall within one month propose a new candidate who shall be elected by the European Parliament following the same procedure.”

In a less ambitious reading, this article would simply suggest that the candidate for the top executive body, the Commission, should belong to the main political group in the Parliament, or should be accepted by this group. However, the pro-integration forces in the Parliament decided to abandon that cautious interpretation and use the institution’s democratic legitimacy so as to promote more competition in the process that should lie at the very heart of EU democracy: the European elections.

On November 22, 2012, the European Parliament adopted a resolution which, among others, “urges the European political parties to nominate candidates for the Presidency of the Commission and expects those candidates to play a leading role in the parliamentary electoral campaign, in particular by personally presenting their programme in all Member States of the Union; stresses the importance of reinforcing the political legitimacy of both Parliament and the

Commission by connecting their respective elections more directly to the choice of the voters”.² In a follow-up Report, adopted on June 12, 2013, the Parliament “asks the European political parties to nominate their candidates for the Commission presidency sufficiently well in advance of the election for them to be able to mount a significant, European-wide campaign that concentrates on European issues that are based on the party platform and on the programme of their candidate for the Commission presidency”³.

Although the formulations are not overly ambitious, this framework exerted a significant pressure on the national political parties to cooperate, inside the political groups, in order to nominate appropriate “top candidates”, although none of them would face a European-wide electoral body. Moreover, the framework turned out to be highly efficient in constraining the post-election choices of the national leaders, who found the European Council confronted with a strong interpretation of the “taking into account the elections” formula.

This conclusion is shared, for instance, by Sara B. Hobolt, who concludes that “this debate is about different visions of democracy in the European Union: one where European policy-makers receive a democratic mandate and can be held to account by voters in European Parliament elections, and another where the only genuine source of democratic legitimacy in the EU is national parliaments and governments.”⁴

Simon Hix, one of the main proponents of a more competitive political system at the EU level, believes that “the 2014 elections could be the next step in the gradual emergence of [...] ‘limited democratic politics’ in the European Union

² European Parliament, “Resolution of 22 November 2012 on the elections to the European Parliament in 2014” (2012/2829(RSP)), <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P7-TA-2012-0462+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

³ European Parliament, “Report on improving the practical arrangements for the holding of the European elections in 2014” (2013/2102(INI)), 12 June 2013, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=REPORT&reference=A7-2013-0219&language=EN>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

⁴ Sara B. Hobolt, “A vote for the President? The role of Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 European Parliament elections”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 21, no. 10, 2014, pp. 1528-1540.

[...] If a party-based contest for the President of the Commission emerges in 2014, this would take the development of democratic politics in the EU to a new level”.⁵

Conventional approaches: from the center-left to the center-right

The three main political groups in the European Parliament – the European People Party (EPP), the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe (ALDE) – adopted conventional approaches to the nomination of their respective candidates for the presidency of the European Commission. There is, however, a significant degree of variation among them, illustrating differences in their political practices, as well as particular constellations of interest and influence within their ranks.

The S&D group did not need to host a competition, as the German MEP Martin Schulz, the President of the European Parliament, eventually ran unopposed. He received the mandate during a Party of European Socialists’ special congress in Rome, with 91 per cent of the votes.⁶ Schulz would also put his name on the German Social-Democrats’ parliamentary list in order to continue his work in the European Parliament, in case he failed to win the top job in the executive branch.

While other prominent members were sometimes mentioned for the *Spitzenkandidat* position, Martin Schulz was almost unanimously seen as the favorite, and given the first choice. His experience as group leader and president of the European Parliament had helped him build a European-wide audience, and this was expected to help the Socialists in their efforts to “Europeanize” the elections. His pro-integration agenda made him popular among the group’s member-parties, though the British Labour was a notable exception. As a spokesperson for the party explained for *The Guardian*, Labour “will not be endorsing Martin Schulz, [whose] political priorities in Europe do not represent those of the Labour party. While not

⁵ Simon Hix, “Why the 2014 European Election Matter: The Key Votes in the 2009-2013 European Parliament”, *European Policy Analysis*, 15, September, 2013, p. 11.

⁶ “European Socialists elect Martin Schulz as candidate for Commission President”, 1 March 2014,

http://www.pes.eu/european_socialists_elect_martin_schulz_as_candidate_for_commission_president, last accessed 15 November 2014.

being able to support the PES common candidate for this year's election, we continue to support the principle of having common candidates.”⁷

The Socialists' main rivals, the center-right EPP, had to organize a vote before nominating the top candidate. The former Luxemburg prime-minister, Jean-Claude Juncker, had already asserted himself as a powerful candidate, though certain doubts were expressed in various European capitals. Eventually, the French former minister and European commissioner Michel Barnier decided to run, so that the decision was taken by the delegates to the EPP's congress in Dublin, Juncker winning by 382 votes to 245.⁸ However, doubts persisted in various national capitals over the adequacy of a Juncker Commission, in case of victory in the May 2014 poll, and certain reservations were maintained even after the voting day. Most significantly, there were moments when the German Christian-Democratic chancellor, Angela Merkel, seemed ready to contemplate other options, in order to build a wider support for the next Commission. However, the Hungarian FIDESZ was the only EPP-member party that explicitly opposed Juncker, and did not fail to reiterate it on the eve of the elections. Prime-Minister Viktor Orbán argued that, given the criticism directed against his country by the commissioner representing Luxemburg, he could not support a chief executive of that nationality.⁹ The rejection was confirmed at the institutional level, as Hungary was the only member-state that joined the United Kingdom in opposing Juncker's nomination by the European Council.

The efforts of the ALDE group to nominate a *Spitzenkandidat* were marred by tensions over Guy Verhofstadt's openly declared ambitions, as well as over the pro-integrationist line adopted by the former Belgian prime-minister. Strong criticism came from two leading colleagues within ALDE, members of the Dutch member-party: both the former EU commissioner Frits Bolkestein and the party spokesman on European affairs, Mark Verheijen, argued that his federalist views

⁷ Nicholas Watt, “Labour rejects left's candidate for next European Commission president”, *The Guardian*, 1 March 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/01/labour-european-commission-president-martin-schulz>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

⁸ “Jean-Claude Juncker elected as EPP candidate for President of the European Commission”, <http://www.epp.eu/jean-claude-juncker-elected-epp-candidate-president-european-commission>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

⁹ Ezster Zalan, “Hungarian PM breaks ranks on Juncker”, *EU Observer*, 25 May 2014, <https://euobserver.com/eu-elections/124293>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

are more dangerous to the European project than the populist and eurosceptic discourses.¹⁰

As both Verhofstadt and the Finnish commissioner Olli Rehn had declared their intention to run, it seemed that ALDE was about to be confronted with a tough internal competition. However, in January 2014 an agreement was reached, with Verhostadt carrying on as top candidate, and Rehn abandoning the race and aiming at another high-level position in the EU post-election landscape.¹¹ Consequently, the former Belgian prime-minister was nominated as *Spitzenkandidat* during an ALDE meeting in Brussels, with the support of 80 per cent of the delegates.¹²

Unlike the EPP top candidate, Jean-Claude Juncker, both the socialist and the liberal candidates were present on their national ballots. However, there were no formal European-wide connections between the *Spitzenkandidaten* and the public. The direct election of the Commission president remains a distant goal for the proponents of a deeper European integration.

No candidate: the Conservatives and the hard-right

As expected, the Alliance of European Conservative and Reformist (AECR or ECR) group, dominated by the British Conservatives, decided against nominating a candidate for the presidency of the European Commission. The decision, announced in a press conference, on February 20, 2014¹³, was based on the member-parties' rejection of federalism: "The AECR considers the process being followed by other pan-European parties as lacking in public support and legal authority. To participate would be to legitimize the idea that a European

¹⁰ "Verhofstadt is 'barking at the moon' says fellow liberal Bolkestein", *Euractiv*, 18 November 2013, <http://www.euractiv.com/eu-elections-2014/verhofstadt-barking-moon-fellow-news-531729>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

¹¹ "Rehn clears way for Verhofstadt to lead Liberal's election campaign", *Euractiv*, 21 January 2014, <http://www.euractiv.com/eu-elections-2014/rehn-clears-path-verhofstadt-lea-news-532887>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

¹² "Liberals confirm Guy Verhofstadt as nominee for European Commission president", *Euronews*, 1 February 2014, <http://www.euronews.com/2014/02/01/liberals-confirm-guy-verhofstadt-as-nominee-for-european-commission-president/>, last accessed 15 November 2015.

¹³ "Why the AECR will not field a candidate for Commission Presidency", <http://www.aecr.eu/aecr-to-not-field-candidate-for-commission-presidency/>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

executive should be chosen by a federal legislature. Yet federalism has no treaty basis, nor any backing from the electorates.”¹⁴ As Daniel Hannan, MEP, the secretary general of the group, put it: “There is no evidence of popular demands for having more pan-European elected positions”.¹⁵ The group’s president, Martin Callanan, MEP, also turned to the “no demos” thesis, arguing that “the lack of a European demos means that any process of directly electing a European Commission president would be illegitimate”.¹⁶ As it saw itself as an alliance of parties, the AECR group also decided not to advance a unified election manifesto, but instead to encourage its member-parties to campaign on their own, taking into account the features of their national electorates.

The group’s position was indirectly expressed by the UK Prime-Minister, David Cameron, in an article published on the Government’s official website.¹⁷ The main argument was that the Lisbon treaty provision making the heads of government “take account” of the election result did not remove their right to propose a candidate. Turning to the *Spitzenkandidat* issue, he accused the two main groups – the European People Party and the Socialists – of doing “a back-room deal to join forces after the elections in support of the lead candidate of the party that won most seats. This concept was never agreed by the European Council. It was not negotiated between the European institutions. And it was never ratified by national parliaments”.¹⁸

After the elections, the AECR was widely expected to give an overwhelming vote against Mr. Juncker on July 15, 2014, when the European Parliament was asked to approve the candidate for the Commission presidency, by means of a secret ballot. The AECR chair, Syed Kamall, MEP, had already pointed out that, despite some positive expectations regarding working with Juncker in

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*

¹⁵ Dave Keating, “ECR: Nobody for President. Centre-right group of British Conservatives and allies will not put forward a candidate for European Commission president”, *Politico*, Europe edition, 20 February 2014, <http://www.politico.eu/article/ecr-nobody-for-president/>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

¹⁶ *Ibidem.*

¹⁷ “Presidency of the European Commission: article by David Cameron”, 13 June 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/presidency-of-the-european-commission-article-by-david-cameron>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

¹⁸ *Ibidem.*

various fields (labor market, digital single market, energy policy), he would vote against the president-designate.¹⁹

The parliamentary vote for the Juncker Commission took place on October 22, 2014, and this time the AECR group was advised to abstain. Expressing the majority opinion, Kamall commended the structure of the new commission, some of its priorities, as well as several of its members, such as Frans Timmermans, who “will ask whether we always need EU regulation, or if these matters are better managed at the national level”.²⁰ However, he went on by explaining that a positive vote was not possible, and abstention was a constructive attitude.

In fact, as far as the vote was concerned, the group turned out to be extremely divided: only 37 out of a total of 71 MEPs followed the recommendation, while 11 voted in favour of the Commission, 20 voted against, and 3 did not vote.²¹ The British Conservatives within the group were themselves divided, with 6 votes in favor, 3 against, and 9 abstentions.²² The attitudes of the group – and of its British Conservative core – are probably related not only to issues of structure and policy, but also to the portfolio given to the British commissioner nominated by David Cameron, if not to the group’s unofficial inclusion in the Brussels governing coalition.

Another group that did not consider the nomination of a top candidate was Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD), dominated by the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and by Italy’s Lega Nord. Its strong opposition to the *Spitzenkandidat* system was part of a wider rejection of the European Union; this adversity was inherited by the new group co-sponsored by UKIP – Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) – with Movimento 5 Stelle replacing Lega Nord as the Italian pillar. Lega Nord was eventually included in another eurosceptic group, Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF), together with the French Front National and other smaller hard-right parties. In the newly elected

¹⁹ “European Conservatives, United Left will vote against Juncker, Greens divided”, *Euranet Plus*, 9 July 2014, <http://euranetplus-inside.eu/european-conservatives-and-united-left-will-vote-against-juncker-greens-are-divided/>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

²⁰ “Kamall: ECR weighs up positives and pitfalls in new European Commission”, Strasbourg, 22 October 2014, <http://ecrgroup.eu/news/kamall-ecr-weighs-up-positives-and-pitfalls-in-new-european-commission/>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

²¹ Dave Keating, “Almost half of ECR MEPs defied group in Juncker vote”, *Politico*, Europe edition, 23 October 2014, <http://www.politico.eu/article/almost-half-of-ecr-meps-defied-group-in-juncker-vote/>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

²² *Ibidem*.

European Parliament, the October vote on the Juncker Commission illustrated a coherent EFDD group (1 vote for the commission, 42 against, 0 abstentions, 5 did not vote); the non-aligned MEPs, of which several – though not all – would later form ENF, were equally opposed to the Commission (1 vote for it, 45 against, 0 abstentions, 5 did not vote).

Two candidates: the Greens

The European Green Party chose to bring forward two candidates for the presidency of the European Commission, an approach that conforms to their tradition of selecting two leaders of their parliamentary group, so as to observe the gender balance. As the chances for a Green electoral victory were slim, the two top candidates were supposed to give visibility to their campaign. Anyway, if necessary, the party members would have been called again to choose between the two.²³

As far as the *Spitzenkandidat* system was concerned, the Greens were keen to trigger an internal campaign, culminating with an interval online voting (10 November 2013 – 28 January 2014), in parallel with the efforts to devise the election manifesto. The primaries were open, so that everybody over 16 years old could vote, after acknowledging online his or her attachment to the values of the party.²⁴

Four significant Green MEPs registered for the primaries: political leaders: José Bové, the French farmer and anti-globalization militant; Rebecca Harms (Germany), co-leader of the parliamentary group; Monica Frassoni (Italy) and Ska Keller (Germany). In the end, the Green supporters chose to be represented by Keller, the youngest candidate, and Bové, the oldest and most experienced one. However, the public response was much below expectations, as only around 22,000 citizens voted online – apparently, the party activists hoped for a mobilization of 100,000.²⁵ One of the possible explanations was that the

²³ Dave Keating, “Greens elect Bové and Keller to head campaign”, *Politico*, Europe edition, 29 January 2014, <http://www.politico.eu/article/greens-elect-bove-and-keller-to-head-campaign/>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

²⁴ “Greens select four candidates to run in primaries ahead of 2014 elections”, *Euractiv*, 8 November 2013, <http://www.euractiv.com/eu-elections-2014/greens-candidates-competead-p-news-531604>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

²⁵ “Online voting flops for European Green Party”, *Deutsche Welle*, 30 January 2014, <http://www.dw.com/en/online-voting-flops-for-european-green-party/a-17395839>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

candidates’ “strategies for the European elections hardly differed, with the exception that each sets a different priority: Harms for energy politics and anti-nuclear power, Keller for refugee policy and foreign trade. Bové is an accomplished agricultural politician, and Frassoni wants to delegate more power to individual member states.”²⁶

However, while acknowledging that the turnout was lower than expected, the Green party establishment attempted to see the bright side of the primaries. In the words of Johannes Hillje, who later served as campaign manager for Keller and Bové in the EP elections, the response should not be compared not with the entire European electorate, but with the total number of members of the Green parties in the 28 member-states: “party members were obviously the primary target group and the share that participated in the Green Primary is not so far away from participation rates in primaries of national parties.”²⁷ This would mean that the main aim of the primaries was mobilizing the party members, instead of engaging wider constituencies. However, the ambitions seem to have been bigger: “by organizing an online primary open to all EU citizens, the European Green Party aims to reduce the democratic deficit, and to contribute to direct democracy in the EU.”²⁸ Hillje goes on to suggest that the disappointing turnout was also due to the citizens’ lack of exercise in public debates on the role of the top candidates, which is obviously true.

The European Greens were not among the earliest proponents of the top candidate system, and were more interested in the process than in the outcome. The open primaries were understandably more important than the personalities that would eventually be nominated. Before the July vote on Juncker, the Green group set a number of conditions for supporting him, among which the call for strengthening democracy at the European level seemed to be the most important. The party also asked the president-to-be to promote investment in a sustainable economy, to “give substance” to European solidarity, and to restore an “Open Europe” inside and outside EU borders – the reference is to the Green concern

²⁶ *Ibidem.*

²⁷ Johannes Hillje, “Green primary – pioneering work is hard, but worth it!”, 5 February 2014, <http://europedecides.eu/2014/02/green-primary-pioneering-work-is-hard-but-worth-it/>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

²⁸ “The Green primary – You decide Europe”, <http://one-europe.info/initiative/the-green-primary-you-decide-europe-1>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

about personal surveillance and other intrusive ways of promoting security²⁹. This was in line with Keller's earlier statement, just after the election results were published: "We Green only give votes to a candidate who also supports Green priorities".³⁰ Eventually, they were not convinced by the candidate's projects; addressing Juncker before the July secret ballot, the Belgian Green MEP Philippe Lamberts informed him that "a certain number of the members of our group want to support you, as we believe that the process which has brought you here today is clearly a modest step towards a more democratic Europe. But [others] do not trust you to be the man for the necessary reforms, and hence are divided."³¹ In October, when the president-designate of the Commission and his team came to the European Parliament for the vote of confidence, the Green MEPs and their colleagues from the European Freedom Alliance (Green – EFA group) overwhelmingly rejected the new Commission: only 2 votes in favor, 43 against, 2 abstentions, 2 did not vote). The reforms sought by the new head of the EU executive were pointing in a totally different direction.

The outsider: the far-left

The *Spitzenkandidat* challenge was met in a somehow unconventional way by the far-left group United European Left / Nordic Green Left (UEL/NGL), who chose a candidate from outside the European Parliament: the rising star of Greek politics, Alexis Tsipras, leader of the far-left coalition SYRIZA and a would-be head of the national government in Athens. His nomination was decided at the 4th party Congress of the European Left (EL), the transnational structure behind the UEL/NGL group, and was supposed to be a "tool [for EL] to burst into European debate combative way", to use the words of the EL President, Pierre Laurent.³² His

²⁹ "For an open Europe with strong fundamental rights", <http://europeangreens.eu/content/open-europe-strong-fundamental-rights>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

³⁰ "Greens open to discussion with Juncker", *Euractiv*, 26 May 2014, <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/eu-elections-2014/greens-open-discussions-juncker-302368>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

³¹ "Parliament elects 'politically ecumenical' Juncker as Commission President", *Euractiv*, 15 July 2014, <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/eu-elections-2014/parliament-elects-politically-ecumenical-juncker-commission-president>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

³² "Tsipras, Nominated by the European Left, as the Voice to Denounce the Policies of the Troika in the European Commission", *European Left*, 15 December 2013,

domestic popularity spilled over abroad, as, for instance, the Italian far-left coalition decided to compete in the May elections for the EP under the name “L’Altra Europa con Tsipras” (The Other Europe with Tsipras). For Nichi Vendola, the leader of Sinistra, Ecologia, Libertà (one of the parties that were to compete under that banner), Tsipras symbolized “the idea of an alternative Europe with respect to the Europe of austerity, of the authoritarian domination by the technocratic and financial lobbies, [the] idea that there is simply no Europe without the rights to freedom and the social rights, together”.³³ Among the other member-parties of the group, there was a notable enthusiasm. For instance, the French Communist Party hoped Alexis Tsipras would be the Left’s “voice of resistance and hope”³⁴, while the German member-party, Die Linke (The Left) invited Tsipras to attend its Congress in Berlin, during the EP election campaign.³⁵

Needless to say, after the elections, the UEL/NGL members of the EP consistently opposed the Juncker Commission: in October, none of their MEPs voted in favor, with 44 against, 1 abstention, and 7 members that did not vote.

Arguably, the leftist group was able to make full use of the *Spitzenkandidat* system, by nominating a popular leader and intensely promoting its personality and ideas. The fact that their top candidate came from a member-state national arena, rather than from the European one, may have helped the UEL/NGL cause, given their emphasis on ideology and competitive struggle, features that are much more prominent in national politics. Ironically, perhaps, the top candidate procedure brought rewards to a group that had almost unanimously opposed its adoption.

<http://www.european-left.org/fr/4th-el-congress/tsipras-nominated-european-left-voice-denounce-policies-troika-european-commission>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

³³ “Vendola: ‘Con Alexis per una idea di Europa alternativa all’austerità’. Tsipras: ‘Se uniamo le nostre forze possiamo cambiare le nostre vite’”, 9 February 2014, <http://www.sinistraecologia-liberta.it/notizie/vendola-con-alexis-per-una-idea-di-europa-alternativa-allausterita-tsipras-se-uniamo-le-nostre-forze-possiamo-cambiare-le-nostre-vite/>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

³⁴ “Alexis Tsipras, candidat du Parti de la gauche européenne for the Commission”, *Le Monde*, 16 December 2013, http://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2013/12/16/alexis-tsipras-candidat-du-parti-de-gauche-europeen-pour-la-commission_4335262_3214.html, last accessed 15 November 2014.

³⁵ “Alexis Tsipras’ speech at the Die Linke Party Congress in Berlin, Germany”, *European Left*, 11 May 2014, <http://www.european-left.org/positions/news-archive/alexis-tsipras-speech-die-linke-party-congress-berlin-germany>, last accessed 15 November 2014.

Conclusions

The European political groups had surprisingly different reactions to the new institutional framework. The three political families that had so far dominated EU politics produced fairly conventional responses, channeling their efforts towards the nomination of representative and competent EU-level politicians, able to advance their respective agendas. Both the Liberals and the Socialists chose sitting MEPs who intended to continue their work in the European Parliament, in case of defeat in the race for the top executive position. On the other hand, the EPP fielded a candidate whose impressive European experience came from decades of participation in the EU's intergovernmental bodies, The Council of Ministers and the European Council.

The far-left UEL/NGL group also played a safe game, by supporting a young and highly ideological national politician, Alexis Tsipras, who was deemed able to capitalize on the widespread opposition to austerity in the left-wing milieu.

None of the above groups felt the need to transcend the regular channels of candidate selections, by organizing open primaries. In the end, only the EPP group had an internal competition ultimately decided by a collective body.

The European Greens were at the opposite end of the spectrum, in this respect. Their open primaries, albeit disappointing in terms of turnout, helped single out the group as a strong proponent of direct democracy. However, their nomination of two top candidates, instead of one, shows that political tradition and gender concerns may prove more important than complying with a pre-established framework, especially as there was no realistic hope for capturing the Commission presidency.

Another type of non-conventional reactions came from the Eurosceptic groups. The Conservative refusal to nominate a *Spitzenkandidat* was based on principle, but electoral calculations must not be dismissed. Especially in the United Kingdom, where they were engaged in a tough battle with the eurosceptic UKIP, the Conservatives would not have benefited from a too close association with the European Commission, widely seen as a powerful symbol of an "ever closer Europe".

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