The 'Personalisation' of the European Elections:

A half-hearted attempt to increase turnout and democratic legitimacy?

Sonia Piedrafita and Vilde Renman

Abstract

On May 22nd to the 25th, elections to the European Parliament are taking place throughout the European Union. Following a recent EP initiative, most of the European political parties have selected top candidates for the position of Commission President, who are to lead an EU-wide campaign, with the objective of increasing citizens' interest in the elections and reinforcing their European dimension. This paper analyses the main weaknesses in the process of selecting the lead candidates and how they are approaching the campaign. In addition to the challenges posed by a cross-national campaign, the lack of a clear political programme and the possibility that none of the candidates will become the President of the next Commission might all limit the impact of this new initiative on voter turnout and undermine EU democratic legitimacy. The mainstream parties might also fail to counter the rise of radical eurosceptic parties, which so far are proving more successful in mobilising the protest vote in the wake of the euro crisis.

Contents

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Introduction

A progressively declining voter turnout in the elections to the European Parliament (EP) has undermined the EU's democratic legitimacy. This year's elections will take place against the backdrop of growing public discontent and declining support for the EU as a result of the economic and financial crisis. To counter these tendencies, the EP has adopted a new initiative by which European voters will supposedly not only select the MEPs sitting in the next EP but also the next President of the European Commission. The EP election campaign is operating under the slogan "This time it's different" in an attempt to induce more voters across the member states to go to the ballot box in May and increase the EU's legitimacy.

The European political parties have already selected their 'top candidates' and started working on their electoral campaigns, but it is far from clear whether these efforts will succeed in increasing voter turnout or that any of these candidates will become the next Commission President. It is also doubtful whether the initiative will prevent eurosceptic and radical parties from making substantial gains in the upcoming elections, causing a further fragmentation of the EP. After analysing the voter turnout in the EP elections over time and across member states, this EPIN Paper will look into the process through which the European political parties have chosen their lead candidates and how they are approaching the campaign. It then examines the likelihood that a personalised and lively political campaign will be waged based on alternative programmes in EU policies that would encourage citizens' participation. Finally, it identifies the institutional challenges that this initiative will face after the elections.

1. The 2014 EP elections in perspective

The main worry overshadowing previous elections to the EP was the low voter turnout. In 2009, it only reached 43% compared to earlier numbers of up to 62%. As shown in Figure 1, the low turnout recorded in the new member states (below 30% in many of them) accounted to a large extent for the overall low figures in the 2004 and 2009 elections. Participation also plummeted in Greece (from 70.25% in 1999 to 63.22% in 2004 and 52.61% in 2009) and in Spain (from 63.05% in 1999 to 45.14% in 2004 and 44.9% in 2009), although the EU-15 average remained stable.

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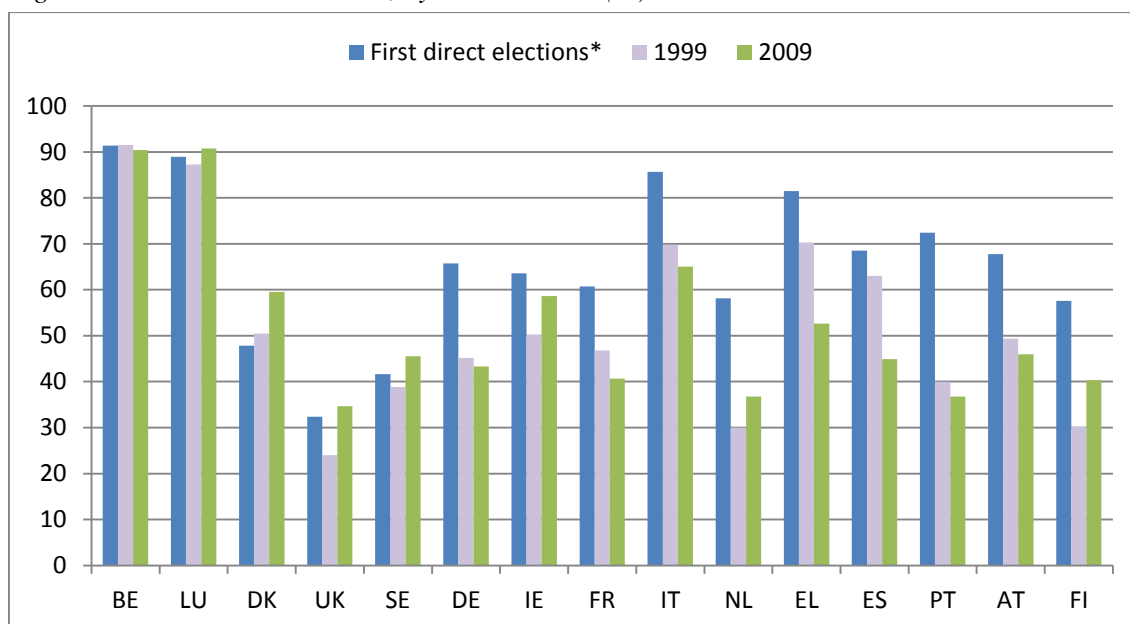
Figure 1. Voter turnover in EP elections, by term (%)
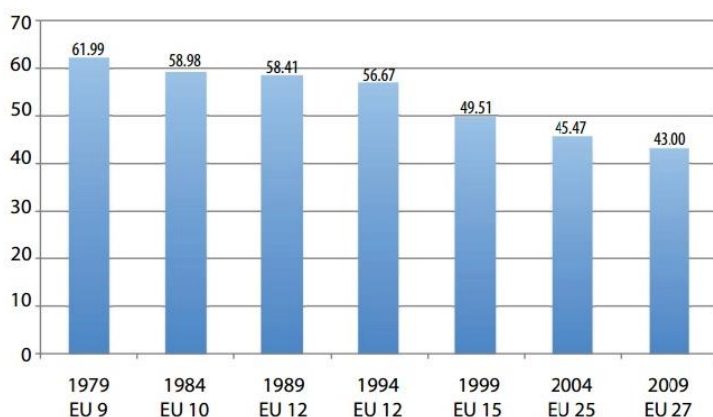
Data source: European Parliament (www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/000cdcd9d4/Turnout-(1979-2009).html).

However, as shown in Figure 2, the participation rate has decreased compared to earlier elections in all member states with the exception of Denmark, UK and Sweden – and Belgium and Luxembourg where voting is compulsory.

Figure 2. Voter turnout in EU15, by member state (%)

* *"First direct elections"* refers to the year when elections to the European Parliament were held for the first time in each member state.

Data source: European Parliament (www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/000cdcd9d4/Turnout-(1979-2009).html).

Moreover, voter turnout in the European elections is much lower than in national parliamentary elections in most of the 28 member states, as Table 1 illustrates. In a post-electoral survey after the 2009 elections, 33% of the respondents claimed to have voted in the last national parliamentary elections but not in the elections to the EP. Some 22% did not vote in either.[1]

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[1] http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/28_07/EB71.3_post-electoral_final_report_EN.pdf

Table 1. Voter turnout in European and national elections (%)

	National parliamentary elections before June 2009	EP elections 2009	Difference
NL	80,4	36,75	-43,65
SE	81,99	45,53	-36,46
CZ	64,47	28,2	-36,27
SK	54,67	19,64	-35,03
SI	63,1	28,33	-34,77
DE	77,7	43,3	-34,4
AT	78,8	45,97	-32,83
ES	75,32	44,9	-30,42
CY	89	59,4	-29,6
PL	53,88	24,53	-29,35
PT	65,02	36,78	-28,24
HU	64,39	36,31	-28,08
FI	67,9	40,3	-27,6
LT	48,58	20,98	-27,6
DK	86,59	59,54	-27,05
UK	61,3	34,7	-26,6
EL	74,15	52,61	-21,54
FR	60,42	40,63	-19,79
EE	61	43,9	-17,1
IT	80,47	65,05	-15,42
MT	93,3	78,79	-14,51
IE	67,03	58,64	-8,39
LV	60,98	53,7	-7,28
RO	30,2	27,67	-2,53
LU	91,7	90,75	-0,95
BE	91,3	90,39	-0,91
BG		38,99	

Source: European Commission and European Parliament, *Post-electoral survey 2009*, November 2009 (www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/28_07/EB71.3_post-electoral_final_report_EN.pdf).

According to the same post-electoral survey, 28% of the abstainers decided not to vote because they did not trust or were dissatisfied with politics generally. This reason was particularly important in Greece, Bulgaria, Cyprus and Romania. Many respondents also mentioned a lack of interest in politics (17%) or the feeling that the vote would not change anything (17%). Indeed, only 19% of those who did vote in the 2009 EP elections said that they did so because they believed that their vote would change something. Conversely, most voters said they had voted because they considered it was their duty or because they always do. Among the abstainers, some 10% also cited a lack of information about the EU, the EP or the elections and their scant interest in European matters as a reason not to vote. This percentage was especially high in Sweden, Austria and France. Recent Eurobarometer surveys confirm the persistence of these attitudes. In 2013, 66% of the respondents believed that their voice did not count in the EU, while 56% acknowledged not to be interested in EU affairs.[2]

Reasons for citizens' detachment vary across member states but, in general, the elections to the EP tend to be less attractive than national elections, the information available is lower and the sense that one's vote can change something is weaker. Indeed, the European elections do not constitute an instrument to sanction any government or choose the political programme of the coming years and, thus, citizens might find it difficult to understand the utility of their vote. MEP candidates are selected by the national and regional parties, which can also autonomously decide on their political programmes and electoral campaigns. All this tends to relegate the elections to the EP to second-order elections largely focused on domestic rather than European

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[2] http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb79/eb79_first_en.pdf

issues. A low voter turnout is not an evil in itself, but it can undermine the democratic legitimacy of the EU, and the EP in particular.

This year's EP election is arguably taking place within quite a particular context compared to previous elections. European citizens are feeling the effects of the aftermath of the financial crisis with mass unemployment, especially regarding youth, and economic uncertainties. The handling of the financial crisis, notably the introduction of strict austerity measures, has angered the public. The situation is not better in the so-called 'creditor' countries, where taxpayers are also dissatisfied by the economic burden generated by the bailouts. What this means for the European elections is that the EU itself has become a very potent voting issue, whereas in previous years it remained fairly distant. Voters have gained first-hand experience with how EU policy-making can affect their everyday lives, a fact that may act both in favour and against political hopefuls. A positive outcome may be that this will increase voter turnout since Europeans will be more aware of the political debates surrounding the elections and hence feel a stronger urge to make their voice heard. A negative outcome may be that the increase in voter turnout goes to eurosceptic and radical parties.

Against the backdrop of the Lisbon Treaty, the EP last year launched an initiative in the hope not only of raising voter turnout to the European elections but also making the EU more democratically accountable. Previously, the EP was entitled to approve the candidate nominated by the European Council. The Treaty increased the Parliament's say in the election of the Commission President, with Article 17.7 TEU:

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

In July 2013, the EP adopted the non-binding resolution "Improving the practical arrangements for the holding of the European elections in 2014", with the intention of providing more details on how the new arrangements should be implemented.[3] The initiative, pushed forward by MEP Andrew Duff, calls for the European Council to first consider the candidate put forward by the European political party that wins the most seats in the elections, and for political parties to nominate their candidates for Commission President early enough to ensure that they can promote a pan-European campaign focused on a party platform or political programme for the coming five-year term.

According to the resolution, "a lively political campaign in which political parties and their candidates compete for votes and seats on the basis of alternative programmes that address the European dimension of politics" will motivate citizens to go to the polls, thereby increasing the voter turnout. Such a campaign may potentially increase the visibility of and the public's interest in European politics, emphasise the role of the EP in EU decision-making and improve the general sense that the vote can indeed impact the policy direction of the next legislature. All this would make it more attractive for citizens to go to vote and have a positive effect on EU legitimacy. As explained in the next section, the European political parties have already selected their 'top candidates' and are working on their campaigns. However, it is still uncertain what impact all this might have on voter turnout, as section 3 will examine. Moreover, it could be the case – as explained in section 4 – that neither of these top candidates in the end becomes the next Commission President, which would definitely sour citizens' attitudes towards the EU.

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[3] http://www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2013/2102(INL)&l=en

2.   Selection of the top candidates

All the main European political parties have finalised the process to select their candidates for the position of President of the European Commission and approved their political manifestos. With the media following the election process perhaps more carefully than in previous years due to its interest in this new initiative, the European political parties have attracted a lot of public attention. They all realise the importance of exploiting this opportunity to present themselves and their political agendas in the best light to the European voters, although they have approached the nomination process and election campaigns in very different ways. Only the Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists (AECR) has abstained from nominating a candidate on the grounds that the existence of a single European electorate is a pretence and that even with the Lisbon Treaty, the Council still possesses the same prerogatives that it previously did.[4]

The **European People's Party (EPP)** was the last political group to openly declare their candidate for Commission President during their Dublin Congress in early March, although they had already decided upon the preparations for their electoral campaign during a Summit in June last year. One reason for their relative delay in choosing a candidate was that some of the possible nominees were office incumbents, who would shy away from openly campaigning. Although it is still possible for a candidate currently holding public office to enter the race after the elections, none of the three candidates who submitted their nominations to the congress, namely Jean-Claude Juncker, Michel Barnier and Valdis Dombrovskis, was indeed a national government official at that time. Right before the Congress, Dombrovskis stepped down, probably because he was not expecting a good result. With 382 votes against 245, Juncker was declared the EPP's candidate for the position of Commission President, although his name is also mentioned for other EU senior positions. The voting result is interesting not purely because of the closeness, but also because only 627 out of 828 EPP Congress delegates actually voted. Some 201 members abstaining from voting could be an indication of a weak endorsement of the initiative within the party, with many national leaders also publicly questioning it. The Dublin Congress also served to approve the EPP political manifesto, which is notably short and vague, showing the difficulties of the party members to tie their hands to future commitments.[5]

The **Party of European Socialists (PES)** produced a timeline of their election strategy as early as 2011, hoping that an early start would raise public awareness of both their candidate and campaign. Indeed, the party was planning to engage in an extensive campaign, including transparent primaries, before finalising the choice of their candidate. However, the process turned out quite differently. During the official nomination period (1-31 October 2013), 21 PES member parties submitted nomination letters in support of Martin Schulz as the 'Common Candidate'. The PES presidency selected him on November 6th as the only PES 'candidate designate' for Commission President. The PES Election Congress, which took place in Rome on 1 March 2014, ratified the election of Martin Schulz and adopted the PES manifesto, markedly shorter and less specific than the 2009 version. Schulz has some important challenges ahead.[6] To start with, the British Labour Party has openly challenged his candidacy and even threatened to leave the PES. This would make it complicated for him to get the necessary support in the EP after the elections – not to mention in the European Council. Furthermore, the fact that his party is a member of the current coalition government in Germany may constrain his public position on the austerity measures, which are a prominent element in the PES manifesto. Finally, he will also have to face concerns about how far he can go in his political campaign while still being the President of the Parliament. Some members of the CDU and the FDP have openly called for his resignation.

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[4] http://www.euractiv.com/eu-elections-2014/conservative-party-single-candid-news-533690

[5] http://www.epin.org/new/files/EPP-Manifesto.pdf

[6] http://www.epin.org/new/files/pes_manifesto_-_adopted_by_the_pes_election_congress_en.pdf

During a Congress in November 2013, the **Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party (ALDE)** adopted their common manifesto and at the same time also opened the candidate nomination procedure. This served to stress the importance of the programme, which indeed is more specific and detailed than the others, over the particular candidates.[7] All nominations had to be ready by December 20th and candidates needed backing by at least 20% of the ALDE Congress, or alternatively by at least two national Liberal parties. Olli Rehn and Guy Verhofstadt emerged as the two competing contenders, with the former securing support from far more liberal parties. However, on January 20th, they agreed in internal negotiations that Verhofstadt would be the party's candidate for the position of Commission President and Rehn for another senior post in the EU. Both will jointly lead the election campaign. The agreement was ratified by ALDE member parties on February 1st by 79.3% votes in favour, 14.2% against and 6.5% abstaining. Again in this case, the process of selecting the party's candidate for the position of Commission President was blurred by internal negotiations on this and other appointments at stake at the expense of its democratic dimension.

Between 4 September and 20 October 2013, the member parties of the **European Green Party (EGP)** could nominate their candidates to run for Commission President, and these candidates then needed to gain the support from a minimum of four and a maximum of eight of the 33 member parties. At the end of this nomination procedure, four candidates (Monica Frassoni, Rebecca Harms, Ska Keller and José Bové) went on to an online primary in order to determine the two final runners. Between November 2013 and January 2014, EU citizens could vote for whom they wanted to lead the Green campaign and in the February Congress – which also approved the political manifesto- it was revealed that Ska Keller and José Bové were the winners, albeit on the basis of a very low online voter turnout.[8] Only around 22,000 votes were cast, in sharp contrast to the party's expectation of reaching at least 100,000.[9] Having two contenders is not a new phenomenon for the Greens who always have one male and one female party leader. Yet in the context of this initiative, it might confuse voters and become a disadvantage. The Greens have openly stated that they know it is highly unlikely that they will win the EP elections and will therefore have to confront the situation of having to choose between one of them.

On December 13-15th, the **European Left (EL)** held a Congress in Madrid, on the last day of which the delegates voted over who to support as a candidate for European Commission President. Having received 84% of votes cast, it was officially determined that Alexis Tsipras, leader of Greece's main opposition party SYRIZA, would be the candidate of the Left to lead their political campaign in the EP elections. The likelihood of a positive outcome for the Left in the EP election is growing and some predict that the party will be the third largest in the next Parliament. This suggests that Alexis Tsipras might have the capacity to gain the backing of European voters who share his strong anti-austerity ideology as well as his strongly voiced opinions that Europe needs to become more democratic and socially responsible. Nevertheless, the candidate's critical and ambiguous attitude to the EU has cast a shadow over the selection process of this party, especially because the party has not yet approved its political manifesto.

With most European parties now having decided who will act as their 'face of the election', the real challenge of gaining popular support for these candidates commences. Already during the nomination phase, the European political parties should have put forward candidates who were not only credible but also recognisable to European voters. For obvious reasons, this has become a problem in the context of a cross-national election in which citizens from one country know little about politicians from another, even about those who have held EU positions. Concerns regarding the geopolitics of the election campaigns are already being voiced.

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[7] http://www.epin.org/new/files/2014_alde_party_manifesto.pdf

[8] http://www.epin.org/new/files/EGP%20Common%20Manifesto%20FINAL.pdf

[9] http://www.dw.de/online-voting-flops-for-european-green-party/a-17395839

According to a ComRes survey, published in February by the European Conservatives and Reformists, over 65% of the respondents in the biggest EU member states (UK, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Poland) have never heard of the candidates of the European parties.[10] Moreover, citizens from some countries might be reluctant to vote for candidates of certain nationalities, as suggested by a Gallup survey released last year.[11]

3.   Likely impact on voter turnout

To have any impact on voter turnout, it is not only necessary that voters get to know more about the contenders but also that these top candidates carry out a lively political campaign that motivates citizens on the basis of 'alternative programmes' and addresses the European dimension of politics. The extent to which this will happen, however, is still far from clear.

Candidates need to increase their popularity across Europe and ensure that their campaigns reach all potential voters by travelling to and speaking publicly in many member states. However, overcoming their lack of name and face recognition will not be easy with barriers as simple as language standing in the way. It is still unclear whether the candidates' speeches in their campaign rallies will be dubbed or held in English, but in either case the communication difficulties will act as a dividing force between the candidate and the voters. The language may also limit the impact of the televised debates that have been organised for the first time in this election campaign. The first one, held on April 29th, was conducted in French by cable news network France24, which of course resulted in a limited impact on voters who do not speak French. In the case of the two debates to be held in English and aired by European broadcasters, it is still to be seen whether they will be dubbed or subtitled. In any case, in order for these transmissions to reach a large audience, they will need to be covered by the most-viewed channels in each country.

Political groups can also use a variety of social media to spread their political message, with parties like the PES, the Greens and the EL being especially active in this regard. The election campaign of 2014 is focusing more on attracting young and first-time voters compared to previous elections. Voter turnout in EP elections has not only been decreasing among the European population at large over the last few years, but especially among young citizens. To counter this trend, a number of websites and other social media tools have been launched providing explanatory information, interactive forums and games about the elections. Most EU member states are witnessing high levels of youth unemployment and young voters do indeed have strong reasons to vote on their conception of the future of Europe. The question that remains is whether European youth will turn up at the ballot box in May and if they do, whether their political choices will reflect Eurosceptic protest sentiments.

The effectiveness of the political campaign can also be questioned from a financial point of view. Increasing visibility across Europe via a cross-national campaign will be costly for the parties that will have to pay for extensive travel, rallies, events, translations and other related aspects of the campaign programme without additional monetary means compared to the previous election year. How they manage their costs and whether they are successful at using their limited resources to reach out as extensively as possible to the voters may well have a significant impact on the overall success of their campaign strategies. The campaign success will also largely depend on the extent of support the candidates receive from the national member parties. In the end, most of the action of European candidates will have to take place in the framework of the events, election rallies and other devices that the national parties will deploy. However, these leading figures might bring different added value across member states,

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[10] http://www.aecr.eu/media/COMRESAECR-Headline-Findings.pdf

[11] Gallup Europe survey, "EU election 2014 countdown: one year to go", conducted in May 2013 in Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and the United Kingdom.

depending on the domestic politics. Therefore, they are likely to be more active in the electoral campaigns in some member states, and even refrain from taking part in others. In general, the credibility of European party candidates might suffer in those countries where they are not clearly backed by the national counterparts.

Further doubts hovering over the political campaign are related to the political manifestos that are supposed to inspire the campaigns of these top candidates. All the main parties, with the exception of the European Left, have already adopted theirs. However, they tend to be a compendium of the party's political ideology, and at best a statement of intentions, rather than a political programme detailing what the MEPs of that party or the candidate for the position of Commission President would be doing in the next five years. Although some manifestos are more specific than others (e.g. ALDE's and EGP's), they are usually general, vague and ambiguous. Most statements in them refer to general goals or political views regarding broad policies (e.g. democratic values, growth and employment, human rights, development and enlargement). Some particular issues such as the trade agreement with the US, border controls or the digital agenda are mentioned more specifically, but even in these cases there is usually a lack of concrete measures and little contention among parties. Most of the manifestos include the party's views in policy areas (e.g. foreign, security and defence policies) where the competences of the EP are very limited. Moreover, the extent to which national and regional parties pick up on any of these issues in drafting their own political manifestos, which in the end are those reaching the wider public, remains to be seen.

Furthermore, there are not many substantial contending positions between the three main political parties that seem to lead the race at the moment (namely, PES, EPP and ALDE). All three share objectives such as growth and employment, the fight against tax fraud and evasion and organised crime, the control of irregular immigration, the protection of personal data, the promotion of renewable technologies, research and innovation. The three parties also share the view that decisions should be taken at the appropriate level (EU vs member states). The socialists' manifesto goes further to include some very general references to trade unions, social rights, a stronger regulation of the banking sector or the social effects and democratic dimension of the new economic governance, which are missing in the others. The liberals focus on questions such as free trade, a more de-regulated and business-friendly environment and reform of the CAP. The most controversial statements in the EPP's and the PES' manifestos concern their different interpretation of the economic and financial crisis. Whereas the EPP claims keeping the euro area together and laying the foundation for recovery, blaming their competitors for their irresponsible spending policies, the socialists accuse the conservatives of creating a Europe 'of fear and austerity'. In the end, it might be these simplistic messages that prevail in the EU-wide campaign, as was hinted at in the coverage of the first televised debate on April 9th between Juncker and Schulz. If the campaign discourse remains at this level, citizens may be confused or uncertain as to what they are voting for in terms of policy options and as a consequence become discouraged from going to vote.

Given the lack of actual political alternative programmes, it is reasonable to wonder how the lead candidates proposed by the European parties will approach their campaigns in terms of content and whether they will succeed in having any impact on citizens' attitude. Additional doubts about how all this will resonate in the national parties' manifestos and their campaigns, to which people are much more exposed, increase the risk that the 'European dimension' of this campaign, if any, will be framed in simplistic terms of pro- and anti-EU discourses, which might eventually benefit eurosceptics and radical parties.
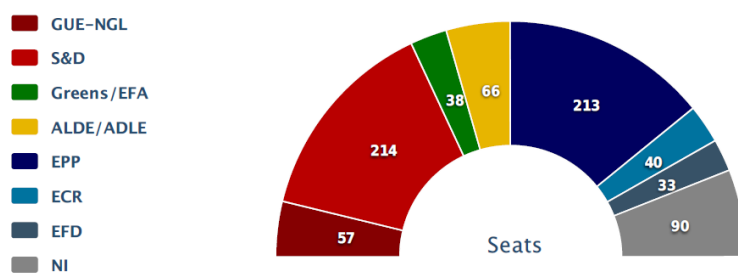
4.   Post-election challenges

In addition to these shortcomings in the selection of the candidates and reasonable doubts over the impact that this new initiative might eventually have on voter turnout, it is also uncertain whether any of these candidates will in the end become the President of the next Commission.

This is the first time that Lisbon rules are to apply and it is still highly uncertain how they will be interpreted, as suggested by the conflicting views between EU institutions, national leaders and even within the European political parties. In its initiative "Improving the practical arrangements for the holding of the European elections in 2014", the EP calls for the European Council to consider first the candidate leading the election campaign of the European political party winning the most seats, with a view to check whether he (or she) would be able to secure an absolute majority in the EP. However, it is still unclear whether and how this will happen. The European Council has not endorsed the EP's initiative and the President has himself raised concerns about focusing on individuals instead of institutional competences and capacities.[12] The German Chancellor has expressed her view that the treaties do not make such a connection explicitly and the British Conservatives have openly criticised the initiative.[13] In their view, it would be legitimate and admissible for the European Council to propose an altogether new candidate, as long as it takes into account the result of the elections and obtains the support of the majority of the constituent members of the EP (376 MEPs).

The European Council will meet on May 27th, just two days after the elections, to decide on the candidate to propose. In principle, although some heads of government have abstained from backing the EP's initiative and others have openly questioned it, it seems likely that the European Council will consider the possibility of proposing the candidate of the European party that wins the most seats in the elections. However, this might prove a difficult task for several reasons. Negotiations are expected to address the nomination of candidates to the positions of President of the European Council and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy at the same time, with the final arrangement balanced in political, geographical and gender terms, and potentially also between euro- and non-euro members. In this context, it might be difficult to fit either Schulz or Juncker into the puzzle. It could also be the case that the candidate of the European party winning the most seats fails to get the backing of a qualified majority in the European Council. In either case, this could lead the European Council to propose a 'third candidate' to the EP, although in order to justify their final decision, this person could potentially belong to the party winning the elections.

Figure 3. Projections of the composition of the new EP according to recent polls
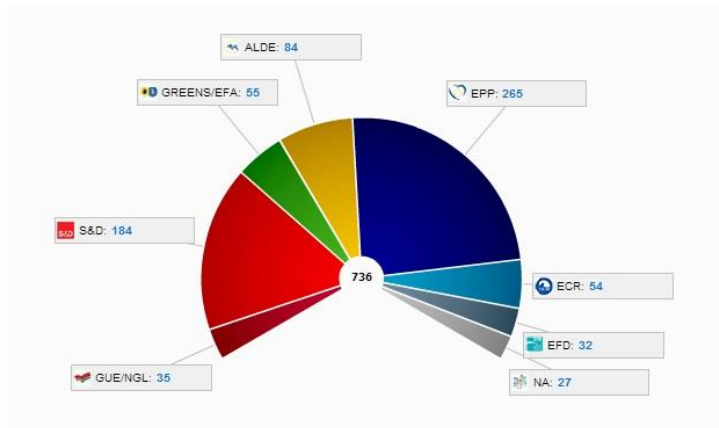

Source: PollWatch 19 March 2014 (www.pollwatch2014.eu/#country).

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[12] http://www.euractiv.com/future-eu/van-rompuy-opposes-direct-electi-news-516360

[13] http://www.euractiv.com/eu-elections-2014/epp-divided-commission-president-news-531372

Figure 4. Composition of the 7th European Parliament (2009-14)

According to recent polls, there is a possibility that the elections will not produce a clear winner, which might increase the margin of manoeuvre of the European Council to interpret how to take into account the results. In its March 19th forecast, PollWatch has predicted that the S&D will come first but only with one more seat than the EPP. In view of these projections, it will become also more complicated to secure an absolute majority in Parliament, given the projected losses of ALDE and EGP and the likely gains that the radical left (GUE-NGL) and radical right parties (EFD and NI in the graph) will make. This would oblige the socialists and the conservatives to reach agreement on the candidate, given that each on its own would be unable to form a winning coalition with the support of other parties, such as the Greens and the Liberals. It is unlikely that Alexis Tsipras' group would support Martin Schulz and that eurosceptic right-wing parties would give their votes to Jean Claude Juncker.

How the game finally plays out is important not only for the EP but also for the citizens, especially in terms of how they feel their voice counts in the EU. Given the ambiguity of Art. 9, it is a golden opportunity for the EP to define its role in the selection of the President of the Commission hereafter. If the EP's initiative succeeds and the next President of the Commission is the top candidate leading the campaign of the party that wins the elections, this precedent will be difficult to reverse in the future. It could also be the first of further steps in increasing the parliamentary accountability of the Commission. On the contrary, should a third candidate be finally elected, the European Council will see its position reinforced and it will be easier for national leaders to keep hold of the reins in the selection of the President of the Commission in the future. In turn, citizens' dissatisfaction with how the EU works could grow because they have been led to believe that they are voting for the next President of the Commission. This might have negative consequences for the turnout in future elections or increase support for eurosceptic parties. In light of the foregoing, it would have been preferable if the EP had obtained the endorsement of the European Council for this initiative.

5.   Conclusions

The desire to improve the campaign process of the EP elections and to reinforce the link between the results and the political direction of the EU in the next five years is a positive development, but ensuring that it will be successful still remains a challenge. The strong emphasis that the European political parties have put on their election campaigns and their candidates for the role of Commission President have raised public expectations that this year's elections will be different. It could be the case, however, that no major changes take place in terms of democratic accountability or regarding voter turnout, with business continuing much as usual. National parties will still play an important role in setting the tone of the electoral debates

and campaigns, which might continue to have a strong focus on domestic politics. The lack of a clear political programme will also make it difficult for the lead European candidates to mobilise voters. Therefore, the turnout might once again be low, with eurosceptic or radical parties being the most successful at mobilising voters and mainstream parties losing seats. This outcome would damage EU democratic legitimacy and complicate the performance of the next EP. And if the European Council does not endorse the candidate selected by the European political party that wins most seats in the elections, this could further damage the credibility of the European elections from the perspective of citizens and have a negative impact on the voter turnout in future elections.