



EU parliamentary democracy: how representative?

Sophia Russack

Summary

To what extent does the European Parliament really represent EU citizens? This paper first briefly introduces the most crucial characteristics of the EP (with regards to its internal organisation, its rights and tasks, as well as the electoral procedure), and then highlights the most important differences between the EP and its national counterparts: how national parties translate into European groupings; the (dis)connection between the European executive and legislative branches; and electoral (dis)connections. Finally, it investigates the idea for institutional reform introduced to improve the representative character of the EP – the Spitzenkandidaten procedure. It finds that the attempt to transform the EU (as a hybrid sui generis entity) into a full fledged parliamentary system does not make the EP a better representative of the EU electorate.

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This paper is a chapter in the book [Representative Democracy in the EU: Recovering Legitimacy](#) which is published with Rowman & Littlefield International in May 2019, as part of the “Towards a Citizens’ Union” (2CU) project of the European Policy Institutes Network (EPIN), co-funded by the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Programme of the European Commission.

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978-94-6138-734-9

Available for free downloading from the CEPS website (www.ceps.eu)

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CEPS Policy Insights No. 2019-07 / May 2019

Introduction

EU integration is occurring against a background of established constitutional democracies (Fossum, 2015, p. 802). Therefore, representative democracy in a multi-level governance EU involves the national as well the EU level. To analyse the state of European democracy, both the national parliaments of the respective EU member states as well as the European Parliament (EP) need to be considered.

National parliaments are affected by the development of a system of representation at the EU level (Fossum, 2015, p. 802). Their role in the process of European integration has changed over time and while they have always been responsible for holding their own national governments to account, since Lisbon they have also been able to become more actively involved in EU decision-making. Next to the importance of national parliaments in the realm of EU democracy, the EU has established a system of democratic governing institutions at the European level, with the EP as the first and only directly elected supranational assembly in the world (Hix & Høyland, 2013, p. 171). While national parliaments and their involvement in EU affairs are investigated in the other contributions in this volume, this chapter focuses on their European counterpart.

The point of departure is the assumption that the EP has a very different institutional ‘DNA’ compared to national parliaments. Observers should therefore not base their assessment of the EP and its democratic character on the same criteria as for national parliaments. The EU treaties prescribe that “the European Parliament shall be composed of representatives of the Union’s citizens” (Article 14 TEU). But how representative are the members of the EP and the institution as a whole?

1. The EU’s representative democracy: the European Parliament

Internal organisation

The current Parliament consists of 751 seats, which is the maximum prescribed by the EU treaties, with a minimum of six and a maximum of 96 parliamentarians representing a single member state (Article 14 TEU, the exact distribution is regulated by a Council decision).¹ Although MEPs are elected on their nationality, once elected and inside the EP, different dynamics are in play: they are organised in ‘political groups’, which are structured according to political orientation, not nationality. These political groups (mostly) correspond to the traditional left-right divide and are home to the parties elected at member state level. In the

¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013D0312&from=EN>

current 8th European Parliament, we find the European People's party (EPP) as the traditional centre-right block, which comprises most European Christian Democrats and conservative parties; the traditional centre-left block which brings together European labour parties, Socialists and Social Democrats (S&D); the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE); the European Greens/European Free Alliance, as well as the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL). Besides these five 'established' groups, the EP also includes party groups widely considered as Eurosceptic: the quite radical Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) and the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF); as well as the more mildly Eurosceptic European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). These political groups tend to be (to varying degrees) critical of the EU's (supranational) powers or nostalgic for the protective role of the sovereign nation-state, although we also find such positions to the left of the spectrum. Differing attitudes towards EU integration, migration and national identity generate deep divides between these parties (von Ondarza & Schenuit, 2018, p. 6).

The political groups are affiliated to so-called Europarties, i.e. transnational, extra-parliamentary federations of national political parties from several EU member states, united by political affinity. The Europarties and the political groups cooperate closely with one another, though they are not identical.² Their relation to each other is similar to that of the parties and parliamentary factions at the national level.

These political groups never display the same degree of party discipline as is customary at national level. We know that some groups show more party discipline (traditionally the bigger ones, such as the EPP), some groups show less (usually the smaller ones, according to VoteWatch). When it comes to MEPs' decision-making, different dynamics are in play: not only the party affiliation, but also personal preference, nationality, as well as institutional interest all have an impact on voting behaviour. The coalitions are thus less rigid at the EU level.

The EP's long road to becoming co-legislator

The European Parliament has undergone a remarkable development since its first elections in 1979. With every treaty change it has extended its competences and thereby developed from the "toothless Assembly" of the European Coal and Steel Community (which was consulted but could easily be ignored) to an genuine co-legislator with the Council in almost all policy areas, holding significant budgetary powers (Hix & Høyland, 2013, p. 172). At the very beginning of European integration, only the Council and the Commission had decision-making powers, whereas the 'Common Assembly' (composed of 78 appointed parliamentarians drawn from the six founding member states), which at its first session in 1958 renamed itself the 'European Parliamentary Assembly', only possessed advisory competences.³ Therefore, the institutional balance used to rest only on the Commission-Council tandem and for a long time the EP had little relevance in the policymaking process (Wallace, 1985, p. 328).

² https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/eu_parties_status.html

³ On 30 March 1962, the Assembly changed its name to 'European Parliament'. See J. Jacqué, "Parlement européen", *Répertoire communautaire Dalloz*, December 2011, Art. 2.

Subsequent changes from a bipartite to a tripartite system were mainly due to several rounds of treaty revision: with the Single European Act in 1987, the Treaty of Maastricht in 1993 and the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1999, the legislative procedure was adapted, from the initial one of consultation then developing into co-decision. Neither the Nice Treaty, in 2003, nor the Lisbon Treaty, in 2009, introduced any major changes to the powers of the Parliament in the EU legislative process, but the Lisbon Treaty established co-decision as the new “ordinary legislative procedure” of the EU, which is now used for all areas of EU legislation. The Lisbon Treaty also introduced a unified budgetary procedure, under which the Parliament co-decides on the entire annual budget (Hix & Høyland, 2013, p. 173).

Besides the increased demand for more democratic modes of accountability in the post-Maastricht era as integration went well beyond single market integration, two further aspects led to an increase in the EP’s power. First, the collapse of the Santer Commission in 1999 significantly damaged the standing of the institution and forced it to become engaged in a “self-conscious period of soul-searching about what its future role in the institutional balance should be” (Cram, 2002, p. 310). This has led to stronger parliamentary control over the Commission, with the aim of providing it with democratic accountability. Second, the increased application of QMV in the Council called for stronger parliamentary control: since the member states could find themselves in a situation in which they had been outvoted, the demand for democratic legitimacy through the Parliament increased (Devuyst, 2008, p. 303).

Democratic oversight

Not only has the EP been strengthened as an institution, the ties between the Commission and the EP were tightened to reinforce democratic control over the executive and to provide it with legitimacy: when entering office, the Parliament screens candidate Commissioners and approves the College of Commissioners (Article 17(7) TEU); during its term the EP has the capacity to hold the Commission to account by posing parliamentary questions (oral, written and ‘question time’) (Article 230 TFEU). Furthermore, Commissioners and the High Representative are obliged to report regularly to the EP and appear before committees. Ultimately, the Parliament even has the power to issue a no confidence vote against the Commission and thereby force it to step down collectively (Article 17 TEU and Article 234 TFEU).

The right of initiative

Despite the significant increase in power in terms of legislative procedure and budgetary questions, as well as in exercising control over the executive, the EP lacks a central conventional parliamentary prerogative: the right of initiative, the right to propose new legislation. According to the treaties, the sole right to initiate legislative proposals lies with the European Commission (Article 17(2) TEU). Special rights of initiative for other institutions and the High Representative only apply in certain specific cases. The Parliament has an ‘indirect right of initiative’, with the right to invite the Commission to propose legislation, which, however, does not create an obligation on the Commission to do so. At the national level, both governments and parliaments are authorised to propose legislation. At the EU level, this right was granted to the

Commission alone so that Community law-making would be more likely to arise out of the general interest, rather than that of specific member states, so as to avoid the dominance of larger member states (Devuyst, 2008, p. 252).⁴ Despite this solid reason, the non-existent right to propose new laws constitutes the most significant lack of EP power compared to national parliaments.

Electoral system

An important step in the empowerment of the EP were the first direct elections in 1979, which aimed to establish a 'European' electoral dimension to directly represent voters at European level, rather than only indirectly through their respective national governments (Hobolt, 2014, p. 1530). Nevertheless, there are still great weaknesses, as there is no uniform electoral rule for the Parliament. MEPs are elected from national lists, according to each country's election laws, and national political parties have kept an iron grip on the electoral process. The EU treaties prescribe that the EP elections shall be held "in accordance with a uniform procedure in all Member States" (Art. 223 TFEU). However, the only obligation for member states is to use some form of proportional electoral system. Besides that, it is very much at the discretion of member states how exactly MEPs are elected. Regarding the ballot structure intra-party seat allocation, about half of the member states use an open list proportional representation or single transferable vote (candidate-centred system), the other half uses closed-list proportional representation (party-centred system) (Høyland, Hobolt, & Hix, 2019, p. 6). In candidate-centred systems voters can choose between candidates from the same political party. On the contrary, party-centred systems only allow voters to choose between pre-ordered lists of candidates presented by parties. As a result of this diversity in electoral laws and organisation, the EP elections can be described as 28 national elections rather than a transnational contest (Grabbe & Lehne, 2019). In order to change this, the idea to introduce so-called transnational lists have been floated. Such a list would contain candidates to be elected in a single constituency formed from the whole territory of the European Union. This would facilitate voting for candidates across member states and effectively give citizens two votes: one for their national or regional constituency, and the other for the EU writ large. First brought before the EP plenary in 2011, this proposal has repeatedly failed to obtain majority support. The latest failure was in 2018,⁵ meaning there is no transnational list for the 2019 EP elections. However, the idea probably will be put back on the table prior to the elections in 2024, as it is keenly supported by French President Emmanuel Macron and also backed by German Chancellor Merkel.⁶

⁴ Bear in mind that at that time only the Council was relevant for decision-making.

⁵ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/ep-votes-against-transnational-lists/>

⁶ "To put in place transnational lists for European elections as of 2024" is one of the agreed points of the Meseberg declaration of 19 June 2018: <https://archiv.bundesregierung.de/archiv-de/meta/startseite/meseberg-declaration-1140806>

Second order national elections

A dominant paradigm of research into EP elections is that they are of a ‘second order’ compared to national elections (Boomgaarden, Johann, & Kritzinger, 2016, p. 130). First, the turnout is generally lower; second, fringe and new parties (often Eurosceptic parties at the left and right ends of the spectrum) do better; third, government parties and established parties do worse; fourth, the issues at stake are usually national ones and the political actors dominating the electoral campaign are often national politicians not in fact standing for election. Finally, there is generally lower media attention (Boomgaarden et al., 2016, p. 130). These trends can be explained by three main issues. First, there is less at stake in European elections, which results in less politicised campaigns and less voter engagement. Second, because there is less at stake, voters have less incentive to vote strategically (‘with the head’), or according to their ideological preferences (‘with the heart’) but instead vote as a protest (‘with the boot’). Third, national parties in government are punished because they tend to disappoint voters more than parties in opposition. The second order character of the elections; the grand coalition of the two biggest political camps; as well as the expansion of the power of the EP over time are the three trends that have influenced the internal politics of the EP and the position of the parliament in the EU’s institutional structure since 1979 (Christiansen, 2016).

Trend development: 2014 and 2019 elections

The 2014 EP elections were expected to be different, because of the introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* (lead candidate) procedure (see section 4) and the fact that the sovereign debt crisis had made EU politics and governance issues more salient to the public. Yet, these European topics were still discussed from a national angle, and a ‘European perspective’ was lacking (Hobolt, 2014, p. 1534). Therefore, the results were not so different from those of previous election rounds: turnout hit an all-time low (42.6%), governing parties did not do well, and Eurosceptic parties made major gains. Neither the introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process, nor the increased politicisation around the EU, did much to change the second order nature of EP elections (Van der Brug, Gattermann, & De Vreese, 2016, p. 6).

With regard to the 2019 EP elections, hopes have again been voiced that the current challenges (e.g. the refugee crisis and Brexit) will make EU affairs more salient for European voters. While this might hold true, it most likely will not have the effect that some wish for, i.e. that European voters become more substantially engaged with EU topics. In line with the second order argument, voters at best use the election to punish their national governments for actions related to those crises, rather than becoming engaged with the substance and the type of decisions that are taken by the EU institutions.

2. The EP and national parliaments: different institutional ‘DNA’

As the other contributions in this volume show, the institutional design of parliaments varies widely. However, there are certain common standards. So, what marks the EP out, compared to (diverse) national parliaments? What makes the institutional (and political) difference?

National parties and Europarties

As explained in the previous section, Europarties and the corresponding political groups in the EP are an assembly of many national parties, rather than genuine transnational parties. These party groups have hardly any visibility for voters at the national level. When organising their campaigns, the national parties do not make much effort to change that or to explain how votes translate from the national to the EU level, because they campaign more successfully under their name and logo, which has presence and visibility among their respective electorates. As gaining as many seats and thereby as much influence as possible is the main driving force of parties, they have no incentive to relate to distant and broadly unknown EU politics.

Second, the EP elections are not so relevant for national elites. The question of who will sit in the next national government will always be more important. Therefore, much less time and effort (and money) is invested in campaigns for EP elections than national ones (Grabbe & Lehne, 2019). The greatest perceived value of European elections is as a midterm poll for national elections, which is why national politicians campaign on domestic policy platforms. Hence, national political elites, in particular the national parties, have been unwilling to contribute to creating a pan-European democratic space (Grabbe & Lehne, 2019).

Third, there seems to be a growing disconnect between national parties and the Europarties/political families, which makes it even more difficult for voters to understand the translation from national to EU level. According to the second order national elections paradigm, parties on the fringes (particularly Eurosceptic parties) in general perform better in European than in national elections, despite recent successes in some member states. However, for those parties it is often unclear which group they will join (or create) until after the elections. Eurosceptics in particular have reshuffled their groups in every legislative term so far, making it more difficult for voters to understand Europarties and the functioning of the EP in a broader sense. The established party groups deliver more stability but, as argued above, not even these campaign in the name of the group.

(Dis)connection between the executive and legislative

Executive power being at stake is a key motivator for voting for a legislature. On the national level, the power balance in the parliament determines the composition of the government. At EU level, the EP is not constituted in an 'government-opposition' formation. Up until 2014 (and the debut of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure) there was no connection whatsoever between the outcome of the EP elections and the composition of the executive, the European Commission. What is primarily at stake is who will sit in the European Parliament, not who will 'govern'.

We find coalition building among the political groups. These coalitions, however, do not translate into the constitution of an executive but are instead ad hoc coalitions to pass legislation. The Commission cannot rely on majorities in the EP in the same way that national governments can rely on their parliamentary majorities, as arrangements are always on a case-by-case basis (Christiansen, 2016, p. 1001).

In the past, the so-called grand coalition of the EPP and S&D always succeeded in obtaining a majority of seats, meaning that these two were able to pass legislation on their own. Furthermore, they traditionally shared the EU's political and administrative top jobs among each other. This is predicted to change in the 2019 elections: according to polls,⁷ the two big parties will need a third force (the 'kingmaker') to make decisions. In a more fragmented EP, with a Eurosceptic 'opposition', coalition building will be more important in the post-grand-coalition period that will follow the 2019 elections.

Electoral (dis)connection

The EP is a legislature with (potentially) competing principles (Koop): the national and EU arenas. As Hix finds in his comparison to the House of Representatives in the US system of government, unlike in national parliaments, in the EP there is no powerful "electoral connection" (Hix & Høyland, 2013, p. 184).

Usually (that is in national electoral systems) voters are able to hold incumbents accountable for their actions (Van der Brug et al., 2016, p. 1). On the EU level, however, things are different, as the national arena remains the dominant factor in the re-election of MEPs. Election and re-election have little to do with the (legislative) behaviour of individual MEPs inside the European Parliament, or the performance of the EU as a whole, but rather depend on the position of the MEPs' national party in the domestic arena (such as the party's governing status, the timing of the European Parliament election in the national electoral cycle, and the performance of the national government) (Hix & Høyland, 2013, p. 184). Voters use the elections to either express support for a national party or use them to punish the national government (Van der Brug et al., 2016, p. 1). On the flip-side, that means that there is a discrepancy between the elections and the (legislative) work of MEPs. They are unlikely to be punished or rewarded for their (legislative) actions inside the EP, which means that they are hardly accountable to the EU electorate.

Along the line of this general trend, the electoral laws of individual member states affect how present and visible the MEPs are for their constituencies, deriving from differences in ballot structure and electoral systems (a candidate-centred versus a party-centred approach). If we assume that re-election is the dominant goal of legislators in the EP and career ambition, if not the only factor, is an important one in shaping parliamentary behaviour, we can see that some MEPs are more motivated to reach out to their respective constituencies than others. And that is for the following reason: due to the low salience of EP elections, voters are largely unaware of the day-to-day activities of MEPs and therefore need to be convinced by candidate characteristics and campaign activities (Høyland et al., 2019, p. 6). Therefore, MEPs in candidate-centred systems are more likely to spend time in their constituencies (and less on legislative activities) as there is a greater need to spend time developing a constituency profile to ensure re-election. Party leaderships, on the contrary, take notice of politicians' legislative activity, less so of their performance in their constituencies. In party-centred systems,

⁷ See for instance <https://pollofpolls.eu/EU>

politicians have less interest to spend time in their constituencies, because it matters little for re-election; rather they need to remain on good terms with the party so as to be put on the list again (Høyland et al., 2019, p. 2).

Hence, we find a lack of an electoral connection to the European Parliament. This prevents a genuine accountability of the EP to the EU electorate and raises doubts about the representative character of members of European Parliament.

3. The Spitzenkandidaten (lead candidate) procedure

To make the EP elections more genuinely ‘European’ by facilitating campaigns around European issues and steered by European politicians is a permanent, seemingly unreachable, goal. Many ideas to go beyond the second order/national election model have been floated, such as the above-mentioned transnational list, attempts to increase the visibility of European political parties, or the harmonisation of electoral practices across member states.⁸ One novelty in the recent past was the introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system. For the 2014 elections, most party groups appointed *Spitzenkandidaten* (German for lead candidate) agreeing that the candidate of the party group winning the most seats in the elections would become the president of the European Commission. Up until then, the European Council nominated this candidate behind closed doors. In 2014, according to the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure, the votes of the citizens translated (indirectly) into choosing who would become the president of the Commission – meaning executive power was at stake for the first time in EP elections.

This procedure is copied from national parliamentary systems (in particular the German example), in which the citizens do not directly elect the head of state, but instead the members of parliament – who in turn elect the head of the executive. To give some electoral certainty, the respective parties announce the candidates to head their respective lists with the promise that this person would be chosen as head of government in the event of electoral victory. The lead candidate procedure is a good example of a national institutional practice that has been applied to the EU level in the expectation of similar positive effects, while ignoring the different setting of the EU. In other words, the lead candidate procedure exemplifies the different institutional DNA of the European Parliament.

By aiming to make executive power the prize in the EP elections, the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure seeks to raise awareness for those elections and European issues in general. The idea is that the different candidates launch a pan-European election campaign in order to introduce themselves to citizens in all member states and present the position of their EU-level political groups (Schulze, 2016, p. 24). The personalisation of candidates can generally (that is at national level) enhance elections by informing and mobilising voters. This was also expected to happen with the EP election, to personalise the EP election campaign with the nomination

⁸ See <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-union-of-democratic-change/file-reform-of-the-electoral-law-of-the-eu>

of *Spitzenkandidaten* and boost voter turnout (Schulze, 2016, p. 24). It has been suggested that open and rival candidacies for the position of Commission president would liven up the electoral competition and “allow a greater connection between voters’ preferences and coalitions and alignments in the EU institutions” (Follesdal & Hix, 2006, p. 553). In short, the aim was to increase the stakes of the European elections and personalise European politics, thereby increasing voter turnout and ultimately strengthening democratic (input) legitimacy.

However, this system did not have any tangible effect. As mentioned above, voter turnout hit an all-time low and research has shown that voters were largely unaware of a) the lead candidate system as such (i.e. that their vote indirectly translated into the choice of Commission president) and b) the individual candidates, particularly outside their own home countries (Hobolt, 2014).⁹ The awareness of indirect support for one candidate was highest in Luxembourg, France and Germany and (74.8%, 63.3% and 60% respectively). Awareness was significantly lower in northern and eastern countries (35.2% on average), with the lowest level of knowledge in the UK, at 13.9%. Unsurprisingly, this study shows that knowledge of specific candidates was highest in the home countries of the (key) candidates: about 55% of voters in Luxembourg and 25% in Germany and Belgium could name one or more candidates. However, in the other member states the average was 8.2%. Again, the UK took the rear with only 1.1% of voters being able to recognise a candidate.¹⁰

The debates around key policy issues (such as migration) were not shaped by the lead candidates, but rather by anti-establishment and Eurosceptic parties (Hobolt, 2014, pp. 1536–1537). “Neither pre-election campaigning nor post-election decision-making delivered greater party-political competition or a genuine choice between rival political programmes” (Christiansen, 2016, p. 1007). Instead, the 2014 elections perpetuated the long-term trend of close cooperation between pro-integrationist parties at the centre of the political spectrum.

Candidates were more prone to campaign in countries where they were already known, and where it was hoped their appearance would have a positive effect on the electorate (Schmitt, Hobolt, & Popa, 2015). Furthermore, bigger member states were in higher demand, as the population size matters in terms of campaigning: the bigger the country, the more seats in the EP up for grabs. Germany by far, but also France and Belgium were therefore the most attractive countries to campaign in (Christiansen, 2016). Furthermore, studies on visibility and media coverage for the candidates have shown that the media did not promote the system: the EP elections were in general not very present and the *Spitzenkandidaten* appeared more as a “side issue” (Schulze, 2016).

So, the *Spitzenkandidaten* system had no positive effect on turnout, nor on the second order national election character of the EP elections. It therefore proved unable to improve either

⁹ Based on an AECR-commissioned post-election survey in 15 member states, where voters and non-voters were asked directly after the elections about the degree of awareness of the political parties and candidates at the European level. Found in (Hobolt, 2014, p. 1536).

¹⁰ These low numbers for the UK are partly explainable by the opposition of all three main British parties to the lead candidate system and their refusal to let the candidates campaign (Christiansen, 2016).

the representativeness or accountability of the EP. Hence, the system is no democratic success; the only effect it triggered was institutional in nature, as the EP successfully enhanced its own influence in selecting the Commission president and therefore slightly altered the EU's interinstitutional dynamic (Hobolt, 2014). In the 2019 election campaign, most political groups have selected a candidate to campaign across Europe. However, the system seems to have lost its momentum. It is significantly weakened institutionally compared to last time because one of the most important political groups, ALDE, is not participating while one of the most important EU leaders, Macron, is not supporting it. Ironically, both are intertwined.

The *Spitzenkandidaten* system implicitly promotes the 'parliamentarisation' of the EU and a federal model of European democracy, in which the EP receives a democratic mandate from the electorate to select the executive – and the ultimately hold the executive accountable. Hence, the *Spitzenkandidaten* system was an attempt to build a quasi-parliamentary system (Hobolt, 2015, 1537). The EU, however, is not a genuine parliamentary system. The institutional setup of the EU as a hybrid polity entails structural limitations in which key areas of decision-making remain in the hands of national governments as "constituent actors" (Fabbrini, 2015, p. 573). Therefore, the Commission is in no way the 'parliamentary government' that advocates of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process had expected. A parliamentary government implies political fusion and institutional interdependence between the legislature and the executive (Fabbrini, 2015, 532).

The *Spitzenkandidaten* system does not really help to close the gap between the legislative and the executive branches, also because the system itself is institutionally illogical: the procedure only extends to the Commission president, not to the whole executive – the appointment of the other members of the college follows a different logic: even if the president attributes their portfolios, they are selected by their respective national governments. Another institutional 'flaw', which exemplifies further the gap between the legislative and executive, is the fact that the candidates that run for Commission presidency are not required to stand for EP elections. The Lisbon Treaty even excludes this option by stating that members of the college are not allowed to hold any other offices (Art. 245 TFEU). The parliamentary status of the executive's members is, however, a "crucial tenet of the parliamentary model" (Fabbrini, 2015, p. 578). A further key element for a genuine parliamentary democracy is that voters should be able to assess the performance of individual MEPs, which is hardly the case at the EU level, as this analysis has shown.

Conclusion

In an attempt to ascertain the state of representative democracy at the European level, this chapter investigated the European Parliament by looking into the main institutional differences compared to national parliaments, and the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure as a way to elect the president of the European Commission.

The European Parliament has expanded its scope of responsibility enormously, obtaining significant powers regarding the EU budget, law-making, as well as control over the executive.

Despite the growing importance of this institution, the elections to the European Parliament continue to suffer from the traditional second-order national election phenomenon, which is characterised by low turnout and notoriously little interest in European issues and European politicians. This is a trend which has held since the very first direct elections in 1979 and, drawing on the experience of 2014, there seems little chance the 2019 elections will be any different, as neither more salient issues (such as the migration crisis) nor the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure have appeared to have any significant impact.

The EP's DNA is significantly different to that of national parliaments. Above all, the missing links between first, national parties and Europarties and second, the EU's legislative and executive, and third, MEPs and their constituencies create a major gap between the EP and EU citizens. This gap is so wide that it prevents the EP from properly representing the European electorate.

The *Spitzenkandidaten* system was introduced to improve the representative character of the EP, but has remained without effect as it has not increased the visibility of EP elections or created a greater electoral connection. Its lack of success further exemplifies the yawning gap between the EU and its citizens. Mechanisms such as the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure, and more generally the attempt to 'parliamentarise' the EU (a hybrid *sui generis* entity), do not do justice to the sophisticated institutional structure of the EU and therefore do not make the EP a better representative of the EU electorate.

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