

Do Candidates Matter? The Influence of Commission Candidates on attitudes towards the EU Democracy

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Abstract

Does the presence of leading candidate—Spitzenkandidaten in short—affect the way that people feel represented by the European Union? One central reason why top EU-politicians from several parliamentary party groups declared their candidacy was to provide voters with a way to identify more clearly what the EU stands for, and how EU-parliamentary elections serve their interests. In this paper we will examine whether having candidates achieves its purpose in the context of perceptions of representation: how well do voters feel represented by the EU?

Prior research has identified the so-called representation deficit as a critical weakness of the EU. The EU has been accused to be remote from voters so that publics have problems seeing the importance of the EU as an institution that actually addressed their interests—what is commonly referred to as a democracy deficit. This constitutes an important flaw in the design of the EU as these perceptions tend to lower the support of mass publics for European integration (Rohrschneider 2002; Hix and Foyesdal 2006). Thus, if candidates through their very presence would enhance the visibility of the programmatic choice set, they may well help overcome the representation deficit.

However, it is far from clear whether this goal is achieved at this stage, for two reasons. First, this is the first time that leading candidates campaigned on behalf of their parties. Accordingly, there is no prior baseline to establish whether the presence of leading candidates indeed influences publics' perceptions of representation one-way or another. We will provide this baseline in the representation context.

What is perhaps more important, however, is that there are apriori reasons to expect that the presence of leading candidates may actually have the unintended consequence of *polarizing* electorates over representation. Their very presence as clear proponents of EU integration may galvanize pre-existing differences over integration among electorates. In the context of representation—our focus here—those who oppose the EU may actually become more opposed to the EU because the leading candidates are all clearly pro-integration. For example, a supporter of a Europe-wide government may well be mobilized by their presence

to believe that the EP parliament does a reasonable job to represent citizens interests given that three top politicians from it compete for votes. On the other hand, a supporter of UKIP or SYRIZA, for instance, may well look at the pro-EU candidates and be confirmed in its skepticism that EU institutions like the parliament work well. To the degree that supporters of integration feel more represented whereas opponents feel even less represented through the very presence of these candidates, the presence of leading candidates may have the unintended consequence of polarizing perceptions of EU representation. We will refer to this possibility as the polarization-through-personalization effect.

In short, we aim to answer the following two questions. First does the presence of the Spitzenkandidaten achieve its goal to increase the subjective perceptions of representation? Second and more generally, does the fact that all candidates are pro-EU actually polarize electorates in representation terms? Having candidates may have the unintended consequence of galvanizing the public to a point of greater polarization.