

Politicising EU Leadership Selection:  
Explaining the Success and Failure of the  
Spitzenkandidaten Procedure from the perspective of  
Postfunctionalism

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Words without References:	19,313
Date of Submission:	16.07.2023

**Abstract:**

With the changes in the Lisbon treaty, the party groups of the European Parliament unilaterally introduced the Spitzenkandidaten procedure, nominating lead candidates for the office of the President of the European Commission for the European elections of 2014. After its arguable success in 2014, when Jean-Claude Juncker became President of the Commission, the procedure then failed in 2019, when the national leaders in the European Council selected Ursula von der Leyen as Commission President. She had not stood as a lead candidate of her party family during the election. Considering the circumstances, the following question presents itself: Why did the Spitzenkandidaten procedure seemingly fail in 2019, when it was already successful in 2014? This thesis attempts to answer this question by formulating an argument on the basis of Postfunctionalism that domestic politicisation of the topic lead to constraining dissensus at the EU level, which resulted in the rejection of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure. The thesis tests the existence of domestic politicisation on the basis of discourse analysis of the election campaigns of significant political actors in France during the European elections of 2014 and 2019. The analysis results in the conclusion that there was no significant politicisation of the topic in France, leading to the rejection of the hypothesis.

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## List of Abbreviations

EC	European Commission
EUCO	European Council
EP	European Parliament
EPP	European People's Party
EU	European Union
FN	Front National
gal	green/alternative/libertarian
LREM	La République En Marche!/Renaissance
LI	Liberal Intergovernmentalism
MEP	Member(s) of European Parliament
MS	Member State(s)
NF	Neofunctionalism
PES	Party of European Socialists
PF	Postfunctionalism
PS	Parti Socialiste
RN	Rassemblement National
S&D	Progressive Alliance of Socialists & Democrats
tan	traditionalism/authority/nationalism
TEU	Treaty on European Union
UMP	Union pour un Mouvement Populaire
QMV	Qualified Majority Voting

## 1. Introduction

In March of 2022, the European Parliament (EP) celebrated its official 60th birthday. A date that has gone over the head of most of most citizens it is supposed to represent, nevertheless, it still embodies an important mile stone in the history of European integration. On the 30th of March 1962, the ‘European Parliamentary Assembly’ was renamed into the European Parliament, four years after having met for the first time, becoming the institution that we have today in name only.<sup>1</sup>

The EP of the 1960s did not have much in common with the modern and influential element of direct democratic representation in the European Union (EU). Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) were appointed by their national parliaments. Starting from 1979, when the first European parliament elections took place that replaced this procedure of appointment of MEPs with direct election by the citizens of the member states (MS), the EP had been successful in expanding its role and influence on the EU steadily over time. This process arguably reached its present peak in 2014, when the party groups of the democratic centre represented in the parliament had used a change in formulation of an article in the treaty of Lisbon to nominate lead candidates for the position of President of the European Commission (EC) during the European parliament elections of that year. This move was directly leading to a struggle for power between the EP and the national leaders represented in the European Council (EUCO) that the EP could decide for its side, leading to the EUCO to choose one of their candidates as the future President of the EC, a central role in the institutional architecture of the EU (Héritier, Meissner, Moury, & Schoeller, 2019b).

Many observers and involved actors from the EP expected this procedure to repeat itself in the following European elections of 2019. Both the 2014 and 2019 would be heavily influenced by a wave of anti-european populism. Whilst these forces could increase their seats in the EP, overall, the pro-european party families still held a majority of seats. In addition, a significant surge in voter turnout overall and in many countries, partly attributed to the apparent success of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure, had surprised decision makers, the media and experts.

Under all these circumstances, the fact that after weeks of negotiations behind closed doors among the national leaders in the EUCO Ursula von der Leyen as former minister of defence

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<sup>1</sup> The European Parliament presents a good overview and in-depth summary of its historical background on its website: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/11/the-european-parliament-historical-background>; last visited on 16.04.2023.

of Germany was selected to become the next president of the EC, was more than unexpected and a shock for many to a certain extent.

Even four years after the event, it remains an important chapter in EU integration history. The fact that shortly after her election in the EP, von der Leyen acknowledged the topic as an important issue for the further democratic legitimacy and development of the EU (von der Leyen, 2019), shows the importance of the event clearly. In this light, the following question presents itself from an academic perspective: Why did the Spitzenkandidaten procedure seemingly fail in 2019, when it was already successful in 2014?

Whilst this question has been the topic of some academic works so far, it has seldomly been connected to the literature of politicisation with postfunctionalist theory at its base, which the following literature analysis will attempt to show. The third chapter will be dedicated to the theoretical development of a hypothesis based on Postfunctionalism (PF). PF and the wider literature of EU politicisation that is based on it, have significantly contributed to the debate on EU integration ever since there was an observable rise of opposition to more integration in the 1990s. The central argument of PF that is tested here argues that a rise in domestic politicisation has an effect of constraining dissensus on the EU level. This thesis argues that different levels of domestic politicisation in 2019 in comparison to 2014 led to the failure of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure.

In order to properly understand the Spitzenkandidaten procedure and the supranational developments for answering the research question, a detailed historical, legal and institutional summary of the development, implementation and failure of the system will follow in the fourth chapter. The analysis in chapter five will focus on using discourse analysis supported by quantitative elements to study the politicisation of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure in national election campaigns of the European elections in France in 2014 and 2019 in order to test the main argument proposed here. Data at the basis for the analysis will be documents of political communication by relevant political actors in France during 2014 and 2019. The basis of the quantitative element will be a comparative analysis of media coverage of the topic of Spitzenkandidaten in French media.

In conclusion, the hypothesis needs to be rejected, as the difference in the level of domestic politicisation in France between 2014 and 2019 was not significant. As a result, the assumed constraining dissensus at the EU level could not have developed due to domestic politicisation of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure in 2019, as compared to its absence in 2014.

## 2. Literature Review

The following chapter is focused on studying the literature on the nomination process of EC presidents before the introduction of the Spitzenkandidaten system, and on the literature that is related to the process during and after the elections of 2014 and 2019. It is the aim of this chapter to provide a comprehensive overview of the academic debate surrounding the topic and to show that with the approach of connecting politicisation and leadership selection, this thesis attempts to close a gap in the literature explaining of the outcomes of 2019 contrasted to 2014. It is the goal to show the clear connection of the two topics by looking into previous literature that focused on this perspective and show how the perspective has not been sufficiently covered after the events of 2019.

The topic of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure, like mentioned above, has garnered interest from many scholars of different fields and backgrounds. The debate that surrounds the leadership selection process in the EU can generally be framed around the more and more assertive character of the EP versus the EUCO as its role in the institutional decision making process grew in general over time. At the same time, the degree of politicisation of the EU largely became a topic that more and more scholars of EU integration invested their time and effort into. By bringing these two separate debates together, the thesis aims to offer a good argument for explaining the puzzle at the centre of this investigation.

Generally speaking, the literature on this process can be divided into two sections: one section covers the research on the nomination process before the debut of a new procedure in connection with the entering into force of the Lisbon treaty, which has become known under the German term for lead candidates ‘Spitzenkandidaten’; the other section focuses on the development, contents and effects of the procedure after its debut during the European Parliament elections of 2014 and its failure after the elections of 2019.

The goal of the first section of the review concentrated on the debate before the significant changes of the Lisbon treaty, is to show how the academic perspective on the nomination of the EC president has changed over time and how the perceived significance of its role in EU decision making has grown.

In general, before the Lisbon treaty and the subsequent creation of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure, the nomination process of the EC president as a stand-alone topic in the scholarship on EU politics and institutions was not a very common approach. Most of the time, the selection and nomination process of the entire college of Commissioners was analysed all together. For example, Döring (2007) studied the selection criteria for Commissioners in a quantitative

approach to look into factors that are important for nominating candidates for the college of Commissioners by different member states, like party affiliation or prior experience and positions in the member states. Especially noteworthy should be his exemplary section on the development of qualification criteria for EC presidents over time, where the relevance of prior positions of the candidate has become of central importance for the selection.

Even before the Lisbon treaty, the struggle of the EP for more formal and informal competencies in the interinstitutional conflict with the EUCO was a topic that scholars with a focus on New Institutionalism were interested in. To an extent, Moury (2007) formulated hypotheses on the development of formal and informal competencies of the EP over time through changes in the treaties on the basis of theoretical work by Farrell and Héritier (2005). In connection with specific nomination procedures, the articles by Beukers (2005) and Schild (2005) focused their analysis on the nomination procedure of the first Barroso Commission. Here, the focus lay on the nomination process of the entire college of Commissioners. Especially Schild followed a descriptive path in his article and speculated about the parliamentarisation of the process of investiture of the Commission as a whole, following the difficulties multiple candidates for the first Barroso Commission faced. The idea of linking politicisation with the nomination procedure of EC presidents can thus even be identified before the changes to the treaties by the Lisbon treaty. Wille (2012) also linked the rising demand for democratic control over the EU's executive with the selection criteria and attempted to explain the politicisation of the selection procedure. In summary, even before the creation of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure, the topics of leadership selection and politicisation of the EU were closely connected in the academic debate through arguments about the democratic deficit of the EU.

With the changes from the Lisbon treaty, the Spitzenkandidaten procedure was unilaterally introduced by the party groups of the EP and successfully implemented for the first time during the European parliament elections of 2014. Especially after this successful implementation of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure, scholars of EU politics and law studied this new phenomenon with special attention. The focus of the scholarship lay on the historical development of the Spitzenkandidaten and the application of theories of EU integration and institutional development to explain its emergence. Notably, a significant part of the literature ascribed the successful implementation of the procedure to the growing power and influence of the EP vis-à-vis the EUCO in this matter, and the EP in general gaining influence in the interinstitutional bargaining process with the Council and the EC.



The work by Moury (2007) that was already mentioned above, was especially taken into account in the book by Héritier, Meissner, Moury, and Schoeller (2019a) who analysed the strategic behaviour of the EP over time in order to attain influence over the nomination procedure of the EC president. Reiding and Meijer (2019) also placed the emphasis of their historical analysis on the trend of increasing power of the EP. In doing so they put the focus of their analysis primarily on the political culture of the EP and relevant political actors from the main European party groups at the time (EPP and PES). Christiansen (2016) followed a similar path and analysed the political system of the EU with a focus on interinstitutional relations and party politics within the EP in line with expectations of Historical Institutionalism. He came to the conclusion that the events of 2014 cannot be considered critical junctures in the development of the European political system.

In a slight contrast to this group of the literature that focuses more on the role of the EP, Westlake (2016) widened the perspective of his analysis and traced back the reasons for the nomination and election of Jean-Claude Juncker through many different institutional and political long-term developments, like the growing influence of the EUCO and the EC president, as well as the general attitude of the EPP towards the idea of European democracy and federalism.

In addition to the study of the emergence of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure, EU scholars were also interested in the effects of the procedure on the institutional and political system of the EU. Dinan (2015) analysed the effects of the European parliament elections of 2014 on EU politics and institutions with special attention to the nomination procedure by contrasting this to the elections of 2009. Lefkofridi and Katsanidou (2018) focused their analysis on the effects of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure on the party system of the EU, by looking into the competition between and the coherence within the party groups in 2009 and 2014 in comparison without finding any significant effects.

The article by Goldoni (2016), framing the Spitzenkandidaten procedure as an attempt to reinforce the position of EC president by politicising it, can be seen as the continued connection of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure to the concept of politicisation and democratic legitimacy. However, this contribution is more focused on the normative aspects of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure, rather than engaging deeper with the literature on politicisation connected with EU integration.

Even though not representing a direct connection between the politicisation literature and the Spitzenkandidaten procedure, research on voter turnout at the European parliament elections of 2014 by Schmitt, Hobolt, and Popa (2015) was able to find a positive effect of the procedure in

their quantitative analysis. In a similar manner, the objective of the in-depth analysis of the 2014 European parliament elections by Nielsen and Franklin (2017) was to look into the conditions and outcomes of said elections. This chapter framed the elections heavily through politicisation of the EU caused by rising Euroscepticism in connection with the Euro crisis, also connecting it with the Spitzenkandidaten procedure. All of these examples show how closely these two debates are related to each other.

After the controversial events following the European parliament elections in 2019, which led to the decision of electing Ursula von der Leyen as the new EC president, a new body of literature on the nomination and election procedure emerged. As the results of the nomination process evidences a rather large difference in outcome, scholars of EU integration now looked into the reasons behind this. Many articles analysed the situation right after the elections in 2019 through the lens of potential effects of the apparent disregard of the precedent in 2014 on the political system and European democratic control. Dawson (2019) for example saw a conflict between consociational and majoritarian democratic models in Europe. In contrast, Fotopoulos (2019) emphasised the positive effects of the election campaigns dominated by the lead candidates and other positive effects of the system on the European party system in general. Nasshoven (2019) gave a very detailed account of the events that were central to the outcome of the nomination and election process in 2019. On the basis of this analysis, she also gave an outlook on the future of the Spitzenkandidaten system by describing four potential future scenarios.

In addition to this group of articles on the effects of the situation after the election in 2019, many scholars quickly identified central points that could lead towards reasons for the contrasting outcomes of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure in 2014 and 2019. All of these following contributions aim at solving more or less the same research problem that is at the centre of this thesis.

Raube (2020) focused on parliamentary motivation behind the Spitzenkandidaten procedure after 2014 and before the elections of 2019 and its attempt to institutionalise the informal rules of the system. Heidbreder and Schade (2020) used an institutionalist approach on the basis of theoretical works by Farrell and Héritier (2005). They argued that changing power resources in a dispute on informal institutional rules between the EP and EUCO have led to the widely contrasting outcomes of the nomination procedure in 2019 to 2014. Hamřík and Kaniok (2019) added to the dimension of political parties and institutions in the development process of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure by also identifying self-interest of the significant actors as a driving force behind the development of the system. All of these approaches to answer the

research problem of contrasting events of 2014 and 2019 under similar conditions, contribute to the debate in unique ways and give plausible ways of solving the problem. This shows that the debate on the causes behind these events are not clarified to a degree. All of these contributions are able to add elements of explanatory factors to the puzzle, but are not able to solve the complex research problem completely.

In addition, it is noteworthy that all of these approaches share a theoretical background of institutionalist literature. Whilst the connection between the topics of leadership selection and politicisation of the EU was quite close before the events of 2019, it seems like this perspective on the topic is not properly represented after 2019. The area of causes, processes and effects of politicisation on EU integration and decision making is left largely untouched in the context of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure of 2019.

### 3. Research Design

#### 3.1. Theory: Postfunctionalism and the politicisation of EU decision making

In order to answer the gap in literature presented in the previous chapter, the following question has to be asked: Why did the Spitzenkandidaten procedure seemingly fail in 2019, when it was already successful in 2014?

The goal of this chapter is to focus on the theoretical exploration of the question and to build a hypothesis on the basis of Postfunctionalism (PF) and the literature on politicisation of EU integration.

Postfunctionalist theory in its core is about ‘conditions under which European integration is politicized [sic] in high profile debate’, ‘public and party preferences over European integration’, and ‘the consequences of politicization [sic] for the substantive character of European integration’ (Hooghe & Marks, 2009, p. 3)

PF bases its understanding of EU politics and institutions on a framework of multi-level governance, meaning that EU governance is separated into different levels that are closely connected and influence each other, leading to interdependence. PF also understands its basic conceptual reasoning behind regional integration as being a gap between efficiency and institutional structures in international cooperation, similar to the views of Neofunctionalism (NF) and Liberal Intergovernmentalism (LI). It views functional pressures in the system of multi-level governance as the central element of the process of EU integration in general and to the development of policy on the European level in particular (Hooghe & Marks, 2009, 2019; Moravcsik, 2018).

PF offers an argument that introduces new elements to the theoretical thinking about the EU that many other theories had not considered before as vital to the understanding of integration dynamics and the workings of the EU: ideology, national identity and politicisation of EU affairs. Many theories, like for example LI, had for the longest time assumed the EU to be insulated from these concepts that are of central relevance to national politics normally. On the other hand, PF as a relatively new theory concerns itself with explaining interest formation beyond bargaining of issue specific interest groups under the logic of construction of the single market that was introduced and advanced in the intergovernmentalist literature and was dominant until the 1990s. Coming from the empirically observed assumption that the EU is no longer insulated from concepts like ideology, national identity or politicisation, it tries to explain the following observations: under which circumstances do ideology and national identity make their way to the European level through the structural conditions of the multi-

level governance system of the EU and what effects do these changes to the nature of decision making have on the EU as a political system (Hooghe & Marks, 2009).

Marks and Hooghe (2009) argue that focusing on economic preferences of elite-centred interest groups, like LI and Neofunctionalism have in common, does not serve to represent European integration since the 1990s. They criticise this elite-centred view as insufficient for explaining general trajectories of European integration with the development of more and more involvement of the general public in EU affairs over time. This is exemplified over time by European integration becoming more and more influential and salient to European societies and politics on the national level over the last decades, especially from the start of the 1990s. Thus, preference formation at the domestic stage in terms of issue-specific and political-economic aspects is challenged by the observation of rising conflict of national identity against the general integration process. This results in the politicisation of topics of EU integration and decision making in the domestic sphere, influencing the preference formation of the distinct national publics in the EU on these issues (Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Naurin, 2018).

The argument of Marks and Hooghe in respect to the influence of identity and politicisation in the domestic sphere and in consequence on EU politics as a whole is simplistically illustrated in Figure 1 as a schematic model of the process. The role of political parties and entrepreneurs in this process needs to be emphasised. It is them who sit at the centre of this model. They are responsible for the active strategy to politicise a topic of significance to EU integration through their choice of arena here, under the restrictions of formal rules and institutions, like electoral laws or the possibility of referenda in questions concerning the EU. According to Hooghe and Marks, an issue is moved to the arena of mass politics, or politicised, when it is electorally profitable for the political actors attempting this arena shifting. This means that the party can expect to gain votes through this move and can credibly and ideologically represent the position without risking party unity on the issue (Hooghe & Marks, 2009).

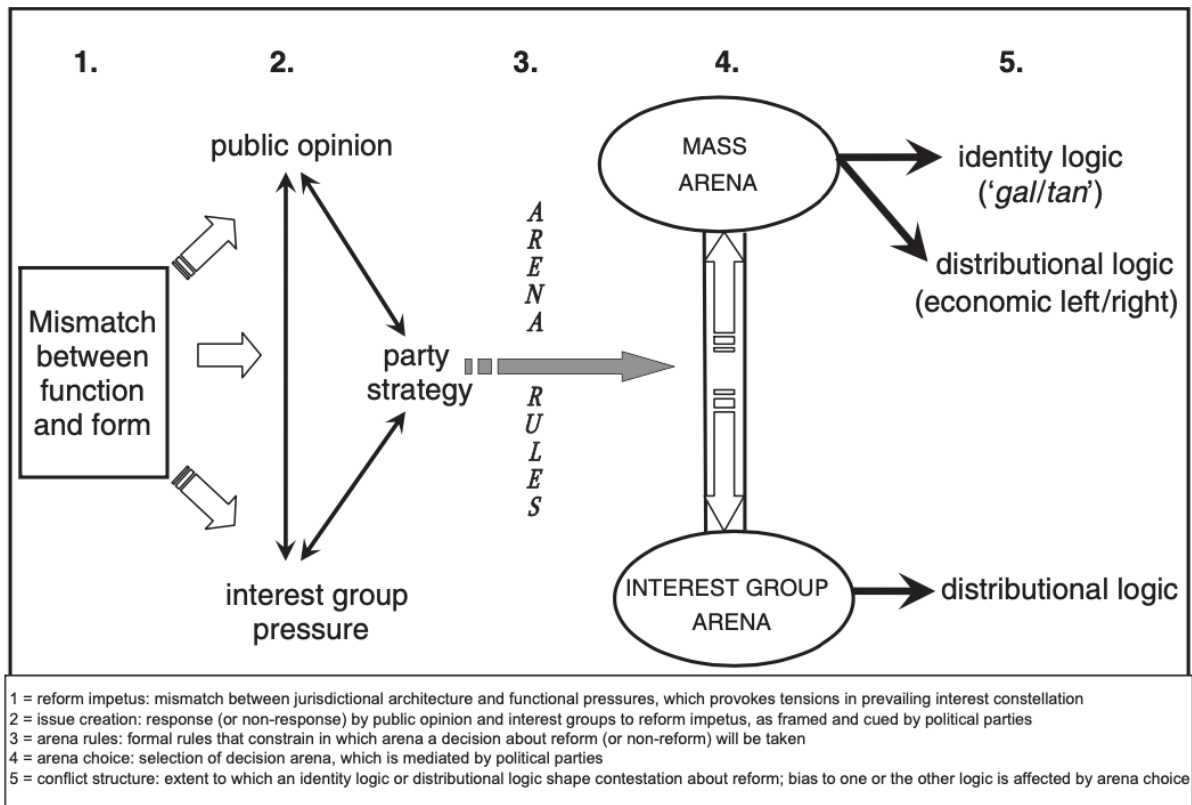


Figure 1: Model of domestic politicisation (Hooghe & Marks, 2009, p. 9).

The role that identity plays for an issue when it is politicised is dependent on several conditions formulated by Marks and Hooghe. Identity has a central role in the domestic preference formation process through the promotion of the topic to the mass arena when an issue has ‘opaque economic implications’ and ‘transparent communal implications’ that is ‘debated in public forums by [...] mass organizations rather than specialized interest groups’ (Hooghe & Marks, 2009, p. 13). Following this ‘identity logic’, the split in party position in the arena follows a more complex, non-economic green/alternative/libertarian (gal) and traditionalism/authority/nationalism (tan) party divide that becomes central to the political contest over EU integration and policy making in the mass arena, as opposed to a simply economically influenced left-right party divide when based on the ‘distributive logic’ (Hooghe & Marks, 2009).

Postfunctionalist expectations from the linking of European politics with domestic affairs is the conceptual term ‘constraining dissensus’, meaning the limited range of decision making options for national leaders on the European level with regards to effects these decisions could have on the domestic level. This effect stems from the fact that by promoting EU issues to the mass arena, the multi-level governance system of the EU has become more integrated by strongly linking domestic politics with EU issues and EU politics to the domestic mass arena, resulting

in a wider range of positions in the decision making process and consequentially a smaller range of acceptable solutions (Hooghe & Marks, 2009, pp. 5, 14).

In conclusion, the central argument of Postfunctionalism can be summarised as follows: Domestic politicisation of EU politics and integration by strategic action of political parties on the basis of identity leads to constraining dissensus, meaning a more difficult integration process in general and specifically a more difficult decision making process on the supranational or intergovernmental level.

As presented above, PF authors Hooghe and Marks simply equate politicisation with the moving of an issue from the interest group arena to the mass arena in the domestic sphere (Hooghe & Marks, 2009, p. 8). The emphasis lies here in the above explained active choice of arena in the domestic sphere, also implying that this process is mostly executed by domestic actors. The motivation behind this strategic move to politicise EU politics is found in the opportunity of these actors to profit from the move electorally. This definition is very minimalistic and does not give a detailed understanding of the concept of politicisation that could be used in the exploration of the topic.

Based on this understanding of politicisation of the EU, De Wilde, Leupold, and Schmidtke (2016, p. 4) developed a more nuanced and detailed definition of the concept: politicisation means ‘a growing salience of European governance, [...] a polarisation of opinion, and [...] an expansion of actors and audiences’. This definition gives a more detailed meaning of the concept and the causal mechanisms of the process. Importantly, Schimmelfennig (2020) expands on this definition by positing that in accordance with expectations of PF, EU politicisation is specifically a domestic process. The salience of EU issues is exploited and polarised by domestic political actors, the expansion of actors and audiences to follow EU affairs happens on the domestic level, rules of arena choice are set in the domestic sphere and votes take place at the domestic level. As a result, he clearly defines politicisation as a bottom-up pressure on the EU political system, resulting in ‘structural constraint’ or ‘constraining dissensus’ as Hooghe and Marks (2009) put it. In this way, politicisation is both seen here as a societal process, but also as a more actor driven understanding of the process (Schimmelfennig, 2020).

In this regard, the Spitzenkandidaten procedure itself cannot represent politicisation as understood in the general literature on the topic. The procedure does not represent a domestic bottom-up pressure on the supranational level. As will be shown in the next chapter on the development of the system, the creators of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure definitely

attempted to create growing salience and polarisation of opinion of EU integration and specifically the leadership selection in the public opinion using the procedure, as defined in PF (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). However, the directional element of politicisation according to PF from the domestic towards the EU level is not necessarily given when looking at the Spitzenkandidaten procedure. The central political entrepreneurs that implemented the procedure in the EU institutional system were very clearly not placed in the domestic sphere. Many politicians that were instrumental in creating the idea behind Spitzenkandidaten during the European elections have built their political career almost exclusively in the sphere of EU and supranational politics of the EP, namely Martin Schulz during the creation of the system and the lead candidate for the PES in 2014 or Manfred Weber as the lead candidate of the EPP in 2019 as well (Héritier et al., 2019b). The European party groups themselves represent major institutional elements within the EP and can be seen as distinct to a certain extent from their national party base (Bardi, 2004).

Consequently, the Spitzenkandidaten procedure itself and its introduction cannot be characterised as a process of politicisation as generally defined in the literature. Whilst some scholars, politicians and commentators view the procedure and the intentions behind it as a clear example of politicisation of EU law and decision making, it cannot be connected with the understanding of the concept as developed and understood by scholars dedicated to its research (Goldoni, 2016). It does not represent a process of bottom-up pressure towards the EU level. Interestingly, it could more fittingly resemble a supranational and top-down process that does not fit within the understanding of politicisation in the context of politicisation literature that is based on PF. In addition, PF argues for politicisation to lead to constraining dissensus, something that the Spitzenkandidaten procedure as a process is not expected to lead to, based on its characteristics and the intentions of its creators. Thus, PF is not directly applicable to the creation and implementation of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure. However, this is not the central point of the thesis. The European elections of 2014 as the debut of the procedure serve as a base line to establish the status quo and to compare the situation surrounding the European elections of 2019 to. The goal of this thesis is to explain why the Spitzenkandidaten procedure failed already in 2019, only one election after its successful introduction.

Both elections of 2014 and 2019 were generally characterised by high levels of politicisation of EU politics. In 2014, the elections symbolised the first possibility for the European voters to politically and electorally respond to the ongoing Euro crisis and the EU's approach to deal with the crisis, made up of three separate crises in the EU: a banking crisis, a sovereign debt



crisis, and a growth crisis (Nielsen & Franklin, 2017). In 2019, the migration crisis of 2015, as it was coined in the media and by politicians, was still a major part of the public discourse surrounding the EU. It also offered a good platform for eurosceptic and populist parties to politicise the elections. Taken together with the other crises still influencing public discourse and politics in the EU at the time, namely the Brexit shock, the still felt Euro crisis, and the rule of law crisis in several MS, scholars of the subject are generally looking at these elections from a perspective of politicisation (Andguladze, Beyer, Coman, & Vander Meulen, 2022; Plescia, Wilhelm, & Kritzinger, 2020).

Following this reading of the European parliament elections, public opposition to the Spitzenkandidaten procedure by some actors, namely French president Emmanuel Macron, can be taken as an indicator that politicisation is a decisive factor to explain the failure of the system in 2019. This also applies to the attempt at polarising the Commission, its legitimacy and its selection process by far-right populist leaders during the elections of 2019 (De Wilde, 2020). Both phenomena will need to be inspected more closely in the following empirical analysis. However, on the basis of these conditions during the elections of 2014 and 2019, the following hypothesis can be deduced from the main argument of Postfunctionalism:

H<sub>1</sub>: During the election campaigns of 2019, domestic politicisation of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure was higher than during the election campaigns of 2014.

The argument to explain the question why, under similar conditions, the Spitzenkandidaten procedure was successful in 2014 and failed in 2019 is as follows: during its first implementation in 2014, the relevance of the system was not picked up by strategically acting domestic actors. Thus, these actors did not position themselves in regards to the topic and did not use it strategically in order to increase electoral success. Saliency of the topic would not be high in the public debate. Neither euro-sceptic nor EU-friendly actors from government or opposition parties would have picked up the topic in their narratives and would thus not have opposing views to politicise the subject.

In contrast to this, the topic of leadership selection procedure had gained more saliency in the public discourse during the elections of 2019 due to the successful implementation of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure after the European elections of 2014, leading to political parties politicising the process during the election campaigns of the European Parliament elections of 2019. The polarisation of the topic is expected to follow the logic of identity, as it is assumed that the Spitzenkandidaten procedure fulfils the conditions of ‘opaque economic implications’

and ‘transparent communal implications’ that is ‘debated in public forums by [...] mass organizations rather than specialized interest groups’ (Hooghe & Marks, 2009, p. 13).

Especially the condition of ‘opaque economic implications’ applies to the nomination procedure for the EC President and thus to the Spitzenkandidaten procedure to a certain extent. EU institutional questions are in most parts not connected with economic interests and have in the past been part of internal and bureaucratic procedures and discussions (Moravcsik, 2018). In addition, communal implications of the leadership selection can be understood as clear to the general public to the extent that the nomination process leads to a decision on an important leadership role in the EU. In terms of a public debate on the nomination process, one of the main intentions behind the introduction of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure was the moving of the nomination process of EC presidents from the confines of the EUCO to the public debate during the election campaigns. Thus, it is assumed that the politicisation of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure would follow the logic of identity and the conflict lines of gal/tan. Following the logic of identity, the split in party position on the Spitzenkandidaten procedure goes along the already explained gal/tan lines of political conflict over European integration. As a result, it is expected that parties that belong to the gal side of the equation will support the Spitzenkandidaten procedure, whilst parties that are counted towards the tan side of the conflict are more likely to oppose the Spitzenkandidaten procedure.

Following from the domestic politicisation of the leadership selection process and the Spitzenkandidaten, constraining dissensus, in accordance with PF, would be expected to manifest itself through contestation between different national leaders, caused by a direct connection of the domestic and European political sphere. Thus, the potential for blocking minorities in the decision making process is assumed to be representative of the phenomenon of constraining dissensus in this case. As Hooghe and Marks, or the politicisation literature in general, never define or explain, what precisely they expect constraining dissensus to look like, this assumption has to be made. Hooghe and Marks describe constraining dissensus to mean the limited range of decision making options for national leaders on the European level with regards to effects these decisions could have on the domestic level (Hooghe & Marks, 2009, pp. 5, 14). They identify different periods or events, like the period since 1991 (Hooghe & Marks, 2009) or the Eurocrisis (Hooghe & Marks, 2019), as points of constraining dissensus, but never clearly define this state. Emulating this approach, the assumption is made in this case that the formation of blocking minorities around the issue of nomination for the office of EC president is representative of a constrained decision making process within the EUCO. The forming of these groups and the effects they had on the decision making process will be

described in more detail in the next chapter, where a descriptive analysis of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure will serve to give context to answering the research question.

In conclusion, the domestic politicisation of the leadership selection in the EU and the Spitzenkandidaten procedure in 2019, as opposed to its absence in 2014 could be an explanatory factor for the failure of the Spitzenkandidaten after the elections of 2019.

### 3.2. Methods

Following the exploration of theory, definition of concepts, and development of a central hypothesis in the previous chapter of this thesis, the following chapter is dedicated to the development of methodology to bring together theory and empirics.

On the basis of the hypothesis, the unit of analysis will have to be established, central concepts will need to be operationalised and links between these will need to be found in order to offer an answer to the question. Establishing a unit of analysis in this section is important in order to clarify the scope of research and concretise the selection process of necessary data. In order to study politicisation of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure on the European level in accordance with the definition of politicisation, the discourse in the MS of the EU on the Spitzenkandidaten procedure should optimally be researched. Discourse analysis has become a popular tool in analysing the narratives of political actors on EU integration and thus lends itself to the study of politicisation in this context (Lynggaard, 2019).

Even though researchers have analysed the beginning of the development of an EU-wide discourse and campaign in the European elections in 2014 and 2019, this development is still in its infancy (Plescia et al., 2020). This means that there existed to a certain extent a debate on the EU in a transnational manner, but this was rather an exception than the norm. It included televised debates between the Spitzenkandidaten and the remote exchange of ‘pleasantries’ between France’s Macron and Italy’s Salvini (De Wilde, 2020; Plescia et al., 2020). Noteworthy here is the fact that some of these exchanges were based on the Spitzenkandidaten and well received in some countries (mostly Germany and its neighbourhood), but remained indecisive otherwise. Or the burgeoning transnational debate was dominated by larger than life figures in executive offices in large MS. This already exemplifies the issue with the fact that European elections, whilst they have become more relevant in general, still are not transnational or supranational in character (Plescia et al., 2020).

Consequently, the European elections of both 2014 and 2019 are still clearly of a second-order nature and thus consist of a collection of national elections based on national contest and

discourse. In order to study the election campaign discourse on the national level and stay within the scope of research, the analysis is limited to a single country.

In terms of significance, France and Germany stand out, as they are both large and original MS, leading to them possessing significant influence on the processes of EU politics and integration. Both France and Germany are decisive in the decision making in the Council and can offer long-term experience in negotiations as they have been instrumental in bringing European integration forward (or not) as founding members of the EU. Integration literature has called the duo of France and Germany the engine of EU integration (Hendriks & Morgan, 2001; Krotz & Schild, 2012; Krotz & Schramm, 2021). Whilst cooperation is not always given and the relationship has not always been cordial or constructive, the influence of both countries alone and together is undisputed. As a result, both countries would make a good case for studying domestic politicisation in the context of the politicisation of EU decision making and leadership selection.

When compared to Germany, France offers a more representative case in order to study national campaigns, mainly from a perspective of biases, feasibility, and comparability. Germany would produce an immense bias in terms of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure when comparing it to the EU wide debate and campaign on the issue. The Spitzenkandidaten principle itself is based on German election procedures and was introduced, as shown earlier, through the initiative of German politicians at the supranational level, namely Martin Schulz, then president of the EP. In addition, two of the four most likely lead candidates from the Social Democrats and the EPP in 2014 and 2019, were Germans. Mr. Schulz himself was the lead candidate of the PES in 2014, whilst Manfred Weber was the lead candidate for the EPP in 2019. This clearly constitutes a major bias towards the importance and influence of the procedure itself in the national discourse of the elections and towards the singular candidates on top of that. As the author of this thesis was witness to in first-hand experience, the meaning, prominence and influence of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure was higher in Germany than in other MS both in 2014 and 2019. This is apparent when looking at quantitative data on the matter. Familiarity with the candidates in general after the campaign was much higher in Germany than in the EU as a whole. Especially familiarity with the German candidates Weber and Keller naturally stand out (Partheymüller, Schlipphak, & Treib, 2020). The bias of awareness combined with the home turf advantage of the lead candidates cannot be accounted for to offer unbiased and representative insights into the politicisation of the topic on the EU level. As a result, Germany will not be studied explicitly in the qualitative analysis following this chapter.

In contrast to this, France offers a much better insight into studying the politicisation of EU decision making on the national level. Of course, only studying France as representative of the whole discourse during election campaigns in the EU also has its problems and the results of the analysis need to be taken with a grain of salt. However, the arguments in favour of France seem to be quite clear cut considering the scope of the research: France is a big and influential MS in EU decision making, in addition to being a founding member of the EU. Additionally, for the analysis of the election of 2019, Emmanuel Macron represents an important leader in EU decision making. Being a staunch but critical supporter of the EU, he represents a new form of engagement with the EU that seems to offer a relevant perspective in terms of research on EU integration in this context. This is then contrasted by his main political opponent on the national level, without much influence on the intergovernmental level: Marine Le Pen. She and her party were the winners of both the 2014 and 2019 European Parliament elections and thus the narrative and themes used in her election campaigns should be studied closely.<sup>2</sup> If that is also partially based on the politicisation of leadership selection or the democratic legitimacy of EU institutions, this could point towards the validity of the proposed hypothesis.

Finally, whilst leaders from France and Germany were publicly seen as influential for the decision in terms of leadership in 2014 and 2019, many other figures from other, smaller MS were instrumental in finding a compromise or solution for the process in 2014 and 2019 as well (Charlemagne, 2019; Kelemen, 2019). The influence of these players from smaller MS has its own merit and needs to be examined when looking into the machinations within the council. However, considering the approach to studying the topic outlined above and the scope of the thesis, France is a representative case overall when looking into the domestic politicisation of EU decision making and leadership selection.

Following the excursion on the selection of the unit of analysis, operationalising of the central concepts to answering the research question needs to be explored. As the main hypothesis states, domestic politicisation of EU integration or decision making by strategic action of political parties leads to constraining dissensus, meaning constrained decision making at the European level. In order to test the hypothesis, the concept of politicisation needs to be operationalised accordingly, allowing for empirically establishing links between the concepts as formulated by the hypothesis.

Using the definition by De Wilde et al. (2016, p. 4), politicisation is made up of three dimensions: salience of EU governance, polarisation of opinion, and an expansion of actors and

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<sup>2</sup> Official Results for the 2014 European elections can be found here: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/country-results-fr-2014.html>; and here for the 2019 European elections: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en/national-results/france/2019-2024/>.

audiences. In order to measure the existence and extent of politicisation that is connected to the Spitzenkandidaten procedure, these three dimensions need to become haptic. To a certain extent, the operationalisation is based on the work by Hutter and Grande (2014). Whilst they see salience as the central aspect to politicisation and deem it as a prerequisite to the existence in a political arena, all three elements need to be regarded as necessary to fully understand and operationalise the concept. The measurement of these three dimensions is best achieved through a study of ‘national public debates [...] as they unfold during election campaigns’ (Hutter & Grande, 2014, p. 1007). This approach is at the basis of the operationalisation and analysis of politicisation as described in the following sections. However, where Hutter and Grande use mostly relational content analysis of mass media, the application of qualitative discourse analysis to forms of political communication from political leaders in the election campaigns as the main empirical element in this thesis hopes to achieve a more contextual understanding of the process of politicisation, as Postfunctionalism describes and expects it.

First, salience is understood as the visibility of a topic in the public discourse. Many studies of the topic apply a quantitative approach to the concept (De Wilde et al., 2016; Grande & Hutter, 2016; Hutter & Grande, 2014). Thus measuring the salience of the topic should be achieved by the combination of methods. First, an application of a simple quantitative element to the analysis will look into the overall salience of the topic in the discourse. Prevalence of the topic in the public debate is established by measuring the appearance of the term in the media coverage of the elections, as media outlets cover election campaigns and their topics. By accessing Factiva, a data base on media coverage with a powerful search engine, quantitative data on the prevalence of the topic of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure can be found. For this, the term ‘Spitzenkandidat’ was searched using the Boolean operator ‘\*’ to also include any related forms of the term, like the German plural ending ‘-en’ or the French and English plural ending ‘-s’, thus including all mentions of the term in the media coverage. Of course, this implementation of measurement can be called into question: Whilst the term ‘Spitzenkandidaten’ is no stranger to scholars of EU studies, it cannot be assumed that the term commonly used among experts will also be used in the public and media discourse. On the basis of this understanding, a small qualitative search of terms that would be used alternatively in the French debate is in order, based on the article search in Factiva. By understanding the debate, the French equivalent to this highly specialised term can be seen in ‘tête de liste’, meaning the head of the list. However, when using this term, it must be kept in mind that in March of 2014, shortly before the European elections, municipal elections took place in France. For this, lead candidates were also obviously nominated. As a result, it makes sense to constrain the

timeframe under consideration to the two months ahead of the European elections, April and May. In addition, to understand the full context, parties also nominate lead candidates for the national lists for the European elections in France, meaning that the word does not have a special connection with the term Spitzenkandidaten and is only used as a synonym. Consequentially, the search on Factiva contains both ‘Spitzenkandidat’ and ‘tête de liste’ in order to get a comparative insight. The search is then limited in time and space by applying a language requirement of French and the following time range: the first of April of the year of the election until the eve of the election (24.05.2014 and 25.05.2019 respectively), chosen due to the time frame of the campaigns for the European elections and the municipal elections in March of 2014, thus allowing for a similar time frame of two months under inspection for both instances.

Contrasting the results should serve as a first and important indicator whether there was a significant difference in politicisation of the topic between the two elections. In order to partially accept the hypothesis, there would need to be a significant difference in the occurrence of the search terms, in order to be able to speak of a truly salient debate. Following from the hypothesis it would be expected that the mention of the term ‘Spitzenkandidaten’ would be much higher in 2019 in comparison to 2014, representing higher salience of the topic in public discourse. It is also expected that the term ‘tête de list’ will be used frequently in the media for both elections, but will be used slightly more during the election campaign of 2019 in order to confirm the hypothesis.

Additionally, the salience of the topic will be measured by identifying the prevalence of the topic in the political discourse of the parties and their leaders during the discourse analysis. This will be achieved by looking into the topics covered by the campaigns and contrasting their perceived relevance for voter mobilisation in the overall analysis of the items of communication under inspection. Measuring salience this way goes hand in hand with the operationalisation of the two other dimensions of politicisation.

Second, the dimension of actor expansion can be understood as the expansion of actors participating in the public debate of the specific topic (Hutter & Grande, 2014). This means that not only members of the national executive are involved in the debate and the decision making process of the EU level, but also other political actors are actively participating and influencing the narrative on a topic (Hutter & Grande, 2014). To measure this involvement, looking into the role the Spitzenkandidaten procedure played in the election campaign and the narrative of different political actors, including members of the executive, as well as the opposition, can be used as operationalisation. Thus qualitative discourse analysis will be at the centre to measure

these two factors of the operationalisation. Two elements are central to understand the content and goals of the analysis, actors and data (Lynggaard, 2019).

First of all, as mentioned above, political actors will be at the centre of analysis. Naturally, political actors is a much broader group of people than just the dichotomy of government and opposition, for example including also administration or media. Yet, the focus of this empirical work lies in the analysis of actors inside one decision making arena, the electoral arena, as empirical research shows that it is the most significant arena for the politicisation of topics of EU integration (Kriesi et al., 2012). In order to accept the hypothesis partially, it would be necessary to see a true expansion of actors involved in the debate in 2019 compared to 2014. Simply taking the topic up and incorporating it in the general rhetoric would already count in regards of this dimension. Thus, it is the focus of this second part of the analysis to look into the topics covered by the actors in the general elections campaign debate and see what topics are covered and if the Spitzenkandidaten procedure itself, and not the candidates as actors, are part of the discourse.

Based on the above operationalisation of actor expansion, the analysis will be based on the following data: the data set created for this study contains different forms of political communication that political actors within the electoral arena of the European elections in France aim at the general public, split into data points from 2014 and 2019 (see Table 1). It includes mainly campaign speeches, but also widely published essays or interviews by the figureheads in the elections. Figureheads can be characterised as political actors that were influential in the election and the general discourse. In terms of the two election campaigns under consideration, the national lead candidates (*têtes de listes*) and the party leaders are actors that this analysis is focused on. Interestingly, whilst presidents Hollande and Macron are influential in the political landscape and are central personalities of their parties, the two actors played a significantly different role in the elections. Whilst Macron was definitely the head of his list informally due to his public presence (Martin-Genier, 2019; Raffy, 2019), Hollande intervened in the campaign only through a widely regarded and influential essay in *Le Monde*. Both candidates from UMP and Front National cited this essay in following speeches. Thus, whilst Macron was seen by the public as the figure head of his campaign, Hollande left the campaign to other actors in his party.

In conclusion, political actors are judged to be leaders from parties that were able to achieve higher percentages of votes in the elections. Consequentially, not all parties from the opposition are included. This has mainly practical reasons. It limits the scope of data under consideration. On top of that, access to the relevant data is significantly more restricted for minor parties. The



fact that four or nine years after the elections, many examples of political communication even from major actors are not accessible anymore, like campaign websites that include programs, or full length recordings or transcripts of speeches, also means that these data points from smaller actors are mostly not accessible either. In addition, smaller parties in this context are not expected to influence the bigger picture overall, when their campaigns were not able to develop enough pull.

<b>2014</b>				
Actor	Party	Date	Type	Context
Jean-Cristophe Cambadélis	PS	17.04.14	Speech	Starting event for the campaign of the PS
Martin Schulz	PES	17.04.14	Speech	Starting event for the campaign of the PS
François Hollande	PS	08.05.14	Essay	Published in Le Monde
Jean-François Copé	UMP	21.05.14	Speech	Closing event for the campaign of the UMP
Marine Le Pen	FN	01.05.14	Speech	Mayday rally of the FN in Paris
Marine Le Pen	FN	18.05.14	Speech	Closing event for the campaign of the FN
<b>2019</b>				
Marine Le Pen	RN	15.04.19	Speech	Event presenting the election program of the RN in Strasbourg
Marine Le Pen	RN	18.05.19	Speech	Speech at a rally in Milan
Marine Le Pen	RN	24.05.19	Speech	Closing event for the campaign of the FN
Emmanuel Macron	LREM	07.09.17	Speech	Speech in Athens
Emmanuel Macron	LREM	26.09.17	Speech	Sorbonne Speech
Emmanuel Macron	LREM	17.04.18	Speech	European Parliament Speech
Emmanuel Macron	LREM	04.03.19	Essay	Translated and published in most EU member states

*Table 1: Overview of the dataset created for the analysis*

Third, polarisation is a vital dimension in order to understand politicisation of a topic. In order to achieve the politicisation of a topic in the public debate, differing opinions of the involved actors need to accompany the already discussed salience and wide range of actors involved in

the debate (Hutter & Grande, 2014). Thus, the discourse of the different political actors, as exemplified by their forms of political communication directed at their voters and audiences, need to be studied in order to find opposing camps in the public debate and clearly trace these. In order to achieve this, the narrative and framing of the topic as opposing actors employ them, will be analysed and contextualised by putting them into direct connection with the gal/tan divide in the public debate, as expected by Postfunctionalism. In order to partially accept the hypothesis and thus deduce that there was politicisation of the procedure in 2019 in opposition to its absence in 2014, a clear divide in the narratives around the selection of leadership in the EU would have to exist that would follow the expected gal/tan divide from Postfunctionalism. Thus, the Spitzenkandidaten procedure as a pro-European aimed at building higher democratic legitimacy for the office of EC president is expected to be supported by parties characterised as being part of the gal side of the split, the green/alternative/libertarian side. Corresponding to this argument, parties characterised as being part of the tan side of the split, the traditionalistic/autocratic/nationalist side, would be expected to oppose the procedure, with moderate conservative parties being trapped in the middle of the split (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). In terms of data, the above described data set of different forms of political communication by political actors from the European elections in France in 2014 and 2019 will serve to not only study actor expansion on the issue of leadership selection, but also the polarisation of the issue. It will be employed to look into the framing of the topics at question from the perspective of them following a EU friendly or sceptical narrative. This classification of the framing of the topic at hand into this simple dichotomy helps to reduce complexity. Specifically, it supports a straight forward classification of the party positions through their communication. This means the classification enables the analysis of whether the polarisation of the topic follows the expected gal/tan divide, as explained above. However, classification into EU-friendly or -sceptic attitude may not be as simple as it seems. Contextual attitudes of the campaign and actors that criticise the EU from different perspectives need to be included to properly assess and classify the statements and narratives pushed by significant actors. In addition, moderate conservative parties and traditional social democratic parties sometimes are hard to classify in their position on EU integration. Thus, positions of the UMP and the PS need to be analysed with greater detail.

In operationalising politicisation, the first of two major weaknesses of Postfunctionalism and the hypothesis based on it need to be addressed as well. Whilst measuring politicisation with the above suggested methodology should give significant results, the link between politicisation and constraining dissensus is vague. First of all, influence of politicisation on the concrete

outcomes of the elections is an important aspect not covered by the current operationalisation, thus not measuring the success of politicisation. Looking into this first element, quantitative data on post-election polls could offer a good insight. In this context, studies on the influence of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure itself could serve this purpose. However, these would only offer conclusions on the basis of correlation, not causal links between the attempted politicisation of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure and the outcome of the elections. Awareness of the procedure is meant to be established on the basis of the recognition of candidates by the voters, not on the basis of the politicisation of the whole procedure. Still, using the results from these polls, indications on the success of expected politicisation attempts could be gained. Yet, more research on the causal links between politicisation and outcomes of elections should help to gain more insights into these links and be able to define causal and testable links between politicisation and election results.

In addition, it is not clear how to view constraining consensus in light of potentially successful and influential politicisation attempts. In concrete terms, what do we expect constraining dissensus in the EUCO to look like under the influence of successful politicisation and election outcomes? As specified in the previous chapter, since the literature does not provide a concrete approach to answering this question, the assumption is made that the structural condition of institutional dead-lock and decision making blockade is classified as a manifestation of constraining dissensus on the basis of domestic politicisation. National leaders are restricted in their decision making range due to the outcomes of a politicised election campaign on the domestic level.

The limitations that these assumptions put on the research design and the results in a whole, will be discussed at length in the conclusion. It will serve to form questions that can follow up on the empirical work performed in the following chapters.

#### 4. The Evolution of the Spitzenkandidaten Procedure

The following chapter aims at the ‘how’ element of the research question presented in the previous chapter. The ultimate goal of this chapter is to give a descriptive overview of how the events that surround its first implementation in 2014 and its failure in 2019 transpired. The chapter will be dedicated to providing a historical, legal and institutional overview of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure. In this context, the section intends to give a more precise understanding of the deemed success and failure of the procedure by accounting for its legal basis and its informal understanding from all involved actors. As a result, the content of this chapter will serve as the basis of the following attempt to answer the research question empirically, the ‘why’ element: Why did the Spitzenkandidaten procedure seemingly fail in 2019, when it was already successful in 2014?

This first section of the chapter will give a detailed overview of the evolution of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure from a historical perspective, with an emphasis on the political struggle of the EP versus the heads of state and government assembled in the EUCO. It is based in large parts on the work of Héritier et al. (2019b) and will look into the development of formal and informal institutional rules that actors within and without the EP introduced to arrive at the procedure as it is known now.

The Spitzenkandidaten procedure, as it was perceived by the public and as it was carried out in the last two European parliament elections, is not precisely mentioned or defined in any legal text of the European Treaties. During the last two elections, major European party groups in the EP focused their campaigns mainly on their lead candidates, for whom the system is widely known and named after. This brought much needed public attention to the European parliament election campaigns of those years, as the lead candidates toured MS, with some exceptions, and participated in television debates (Schmitt et al., 2015).

On paper, the TEU, as amended by the Lisbon Treaty, sets out the process for determining the President of the Commission. Article 17 paragraph 7 states that the EUCO proposes the candidate, taking into account the outcome of the European parliament elections. The Parliament then votes on this candidate. This vague wording thus leaves some room for interpretation.

Yet, the historical development of the Spitzenkandidaten system can be traced back to the first direct election of the EP. This already emphasises the role the EP played in the development of this procedure in terms of informal rules that play a significant role here, as well as the EP’s influence on changes in the treaties. In general, Héritier et al. (2019b) classify the role of the

EP vis-à-vis the MS in EUCO as a central strategic actor and unilateral innovator in terms of changes in rules.

The Treaty of Rome stipulated that the nominee of the EC President and the whole Commission should be jointly elected by the MS. Thus, the Parliament, at that time not yet named as such, had no influence on this important personnel decision. After the first European parliament elections in 1979, the EP established a requirement for a debate on the program with the EC President-designate. In addition, a vote of confidence was to take place in the Parliament. EC President-designate Gaston Thorn came to the EP in 1980 to an informal parliamentary hearing. In 1985, the first Delors Commission also waited to take office until it had undergone a successful vote of confidence in Parliament. Thus, the EP was successful in implementing informal rules that strengthened its role in this institutional process. It has to also be mentioned that these changes were made with the clear approval by the EC, which could be interpreted as an informal alliance (Héritier et al., 2019b).

These informal elements of the institution of the nomination of the EC President were then de facto formalised in the Maastricht Treaty. Here it was stipulated that the candidate would be nominated by the MS after consultation with the EP. Subsequently, the entire Commission was to be confirmed by a vote of approval in the EP (Héritier et al., 2019b; Shackleton, 2017).

In 1993, the EP unilaterally changed its internal rules again by interpreting the Maastricht Treaty in a way that reflected its strategic objective of more influence over decisions concerning the executive of the EU. The EP decided that the candidate for the post of EC President should be confirmed or rejected by a binding vote after a parliamentary debate. In the event of a negative result, the Parliament intended to reject the investiture of the entire Commission. The Santer Commission agreed to this change and was narrowly confirmed in the EP (Héritier et al., 2019b). The 1997 Amsterdam Treaty formalised this informal change in favour of the EP. Now the candidate was nominated by the MS and confirmed in the EP (Héritier et al., 2019b). In 1999, the EP replaced the phrase ‘vote of approval’ in its internal rules with the phrase ‘election’ (Héritier et al., 2019b, p. 71). This wording was then incorporated into the proposed constitutional treaty and, after its rejection, into the Lisbon Treaty, which then led to the wording that is in force today:

*‘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. [...]’*

### *Article 17 (7) Treaty on European Union (TEU)*

In addition, two declarations were part of the final act of the Intergovernmental Conference that adopted the Treaty of Lisbon. These two declarations clarified the procedure to a certain extent. Firstly, geographic and demographic diversity of the EU should be represented by the top offices of the EU, thus including the position of EC President. Secondly, the EP and EUCO are urged to make sure that the process of nomination and selection of the candidate for the office runs smoothly and is closely coordinated between the two institutions according to the rules set out in article 17 paragraph 7 (Margaritis, 2014).

These legal requirements for the selection of the EP president mean that the EUCO, as the representation of the national governments in the procedure, is the defining institution in the nomination and election procedure. In principle, the EUCO has the right to unilaterally find a personal solution based on compromise between national leaders for this central position in the institutional construct of the EU. However, the EP also plays an important role in the nomination and election procedure, as its vote of approval is needed in order to put the candidate into office finally. This legal positioning of the EP and the EUCO in the process will most likely lead to political conflict between the two institutions. This is also reflected in the second declaration mentioned above. The EUCO has to consider the opinion of the EP in order to avoid a deadlock in the decision making process due to the EP's ability to block the vote of approval necessary in the end. Still, these conditions left much room for interpretation, which also significantly influenced the final creation of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure and the scenarios surrounding the nomination of candidates in 2014 and 2019.

In order to finally define the procedure as an informal rule in institutional structure of the EU, the origin of the formulation in the legal text on the consideration of the result of the European parliament election, which was included in the Lisbon text, needs to be understood. The origin of this small but significant subordinate clause can be traced back to unilateral action by important actors within the EP. Already after the 2004 election, the EPP insisted on electing a candidate from their own ranks as EC President, as they constituted the largest group in the EP after the election (Shackleton, 2017). The final emergence of the Spitzenkandidaten system can then also be traced back to unilateral action by the EP. After the 2009 election and before the Lisbon Treaty came into force, Barroso was again nominated as EC President and the Commission was confirmed in office in the EP in early 2010. The institutional innovation, which finally led to the Spitzenkandidaten system, then emanated from another central EP actor. Once again, a party family took the central role. This time it was the PES party group, which wanted to nominate a candidate for the next Commission from its own ranks. The group was

supported in its plan by the Commission, which hoped that this step would increase the democratic legitimacy of its own institution. A resolution of the EP in 2012 then called on all party families to nominate top candidates for the next election. In this initiative, Martin Schulz and Klaus Welle, as President of the EP and Secretary General of the EP respectively, and leading members of the PES party group, were particularly decisive actors in pushing this development forward. This resolution was then finally concretised in 2013 by proposing an early nomination of candidates for the European parliament elections in 2014 (Héritier et al., 2019b).

In conclusion of this section, the EP and actors associated with it played a significant part in expanding the role the EP played in the nomination procedure of the EC president over time. This development process culminated in the creation of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure on the part of the EP through the resolution to nominate lead candidates for the elections in 2014. In the context of this thesis, the Spitzenkandidaten procedure is simplified to mean the idea and implementation of lead candidates for European party groups during European parliament elections.

However, regarding the general trend of institutional development, the significance of the intergovernmental institution of the EUCO has to be taken into account as well. During the financial and sovereign debt crisis in the early 2010s, the importance of intergovernmental action was increased by the significant role of the EUCO in managing the crisis, in comparison to the role of the EC or EP (Christiansen, 2016). In this development, the so called integration paradox has to be considered as well: despite considerable extensions of the competences of the supranational elements of the EU after the Maastricht Treaty, this expansion, especially of the EP, was rather minimal in comparison to the role of the MS during the developments of the euro crisis (Puetter, 2012). In this context, a parallel can also be drawn to the role of the EP in nominating and electing the EC president. Even though the EP has successfully expanded its role in the process, the MS in the EUCO are still in a clear position of leadership. The EP plays a significant role in the selection process through its final confirmatory vote and all the influence that entails from its position in the interinstitutional conflict between the EP and EUCO, further reinforced through the creation of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure in the first place. However, it is the national leaders who decide in the end who to select as their candidate to be brought before the EP.

By looking into the role that national leaders played during the events of 2014 and 2019, it is the goal of the following paragraphs to answer the ‘how’ element of the research question. This



section is aimed to be a descriptive element of looking into the situation within the EUCO after the elections of 2014 and 2019 whilst considering the rules that apply. This is achieved by giving a descriptive analysis of the question how the nomination procedure played out in the EUCO in 2014 and 2019.

In connection with the enlargement process that saw the EU grow from 15 to 28 MS over a relatively short time-frame, changes were made to the decision-making process in the EUCO with the introduction of the Nice treaty in 2004. Among other processes, the vote for a candidate for the EC presidency was changed from unanimity to qualified majority voting (QMV) (Goebel, 2011). QMV means that decisions are taken by a significant majority of MS in the EUCO. The majority is based on both a threshold of MS (55%) and total EU population (65%). In reverse, this means that a blocking minority can form around an issue. A blocking minority has to consist of at least four MS.<sup>3</sup> In addition, at least 35% of the EU's population would need to be represented by the blocking minority as well. Taken together, QMV and the enlarged size of the EUCO, representing MS with a more and more diverse range of interests, the potential for a dead-lock in the decision making process is a possible outcome under consideration. Even though QMV is a simplification of the procedure in comparison to unanimity in the EUCO, intended to be a solution for this issue, theoretical expectations can imply that a risk of total institutional blockage in these important questions of positions and personnel is expected when a block of new MS can form around a diverging interest (Kelemen, Menon, & Slapin, 2014; Moravcsik & Vachudova, 2005). Whilst no such dead-lock could be observed empirically so far, the risk is there nonetheless (Toshkov, 2017).

In 2014, for the first time, the MS could not nominate an EC President by unanimity. Both the UK and Hungary did not support the vote for Juncker under the reasoning of a significant infringement on the national interest (Tushnet et al., 2017). However, both countries could not muster a sufficiently large blocking minority and therefore, the lead candidate of the victorious EPP was nominated and finally approved by the EP. In this case, QMV managed to circumvent a potential block by a more and more diverse group of MS in the EUCO, with Britain and Hungary as early leaders of a forming block of Eurosceptics (Christiansen, 2016).

The significance of this ideological block of eurosceptic MS would then be on show in the situation around the nomination procedure in 2019. There, a combination of the decisive and growing influence of the so-called eurosceptic and nationalist Visegrád group and the abstention of the UK due to its exit from the EU came together. This meant that a blocking

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on QMV and blocking minorities, the Council website offers an overview of the topic: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/voting-system/qualified-majority/>; last visited on 23.04.23.

minority against, in particular, the candidates emanating from the Spitzenkandidaten procedure out of general rejection of the system was successfully implemented. However, this was not the only potential blocking minority that formed around the rejection of the Spitzenkandidaten system. In addition to the eurosceptic MS, the ALDE party group also rejected the Spitzenkandidaten procedure as they saw transnational lists as the more suitable reform for a more meaningful European democracy. Led by French President Macron, national leaders from MS with affiliation to ALDE also rejected Manfred Weber as a candidate to become EC President (Nasshoven, 2019).

In summary, as a blocking minority formed around MS opposing the Spitzenkandidaten procedure in 2019, the only way to solve this issue within the EUCO was to overrule the procedure and thus nominate a candidate who would still fulfil the formal criteria as laid out in Article 17 TEU and the declaration of the Lisbon treaty. It is in the interest of actors within EU institutions to overcome political blockade of their institution, as well as interinstitutional blockades, in order to preserve efficiency of the decision making process and legitimacy of the own institution and the EU as a whole (Mühlböck & Rittberger, 2015). Thus, the national leaders in the EUCO overruled the informal Spitzenkandidaten procedure in order to overcome a blocking minority and a general blockade in the nomination procedure. The situation was markedly different in 2014, when there was no blocking minority around the lead candidate Juncker<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> It has to be mentioned here that this perspective largely leaves out the situations within the EP in 2014 and 2019 in order to simplify this complex interinstitutional conflict and focus on the EUCO as the dominant actor in this process. In 2014, the EP as an actor in the conflict with the EUCO could present a unified position behind the Spitzenkandidaten procedure, as the informal ‘grand coalition’ between EPP and PES still had the majority within the EP. This was not the case anymore in 2019. Thus, the EP could not strongly threaten a blocking of candidates in the final vote anymore (Heidbreder & Schade, 2020; Mühlböck & Rittberger, 2015).

## 5. Analysis: Contrasting the politicisation of the EU in the European elections of 2014 and 2019

By giving an in-depth description of the evolution of the leadership selection process in the EU and the outcomes of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure in 2014 and 2019 on the European level, the previous chapter established a path to the explanation of the research question. The following chapter is aimed at testing the previously established hypothesis to explain the why element of the research question: why was there a blocking minority against the candidates of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure in 2019, when there was none in 2014?

The goal of the following analysis is to test the hypothesis established above by following the established operationalisation of politicisation and contrasting the discourse of the election campaigns of major parties in France for the European elections of 2014 and 2019. First, salience of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure in the campaigns will be compared, followed by an analysis of the narratives of the campaigns focused on the actors taking part in the public discourse and the framing of topics established by these actors.

### 5.1. Salience of the Spitzenkandidaten in 2014 and 2019 compared

In terms of salience of the debate, the search on Factiva gives a very clear result (see table 2). During the months of April and May 2014 that were the focus of the election campaigns, the term ‘Spitzenkandidat’ in its variation was only used twice in French publications, including one mention in a Belgium/European newspaper. In contrast to this, the French term ‘tête de liste’ in its variations was used 5343 times in the same period. However, as explained above, this mostly includes the mention of the national lead candidates and less so the European Spitzenkandidaten from a quick overview of the articles found in the search. This contrast in numbers, is tendentially indicating that the European lead candidates did not have a significant role in the media and public discourse during these elections.

In comparison to these results, the following numbers were found for the same searches during the campaigns before the European elections of 2019: During the same time frame, the term ‘Spitzenkandidat’ and its variants were found 347 times, a significant increase in usage. In comparison, the term ‘tête de liste’ and its variations were used 6686 times this time. This represents also a significant increase in usage of the term. Both these increases point towards a significant shift in salience of the concept. Whilst the increase of the usage of ‘Spitzenkandidat’ is rather large, and can represent the shift in salience of the topic, the shift in the French equivalent is not as significant in relative terms. However, using it as a representation it can be

seen as either a shift in salience of the topic of leadership selection or in general as an increase of the significance of the European elections in the public discourse overall. This second option is way more likely, as it also goes hand in hand with other empirical observations of the 2019 elections, as elaborated above. However, this does not rule out the fact that it also represents an increase in salience of the debate on the Spitzenkandidaten procedure.

	2014	2019
‘Spitzenkandidat’	2	347
‘tête de liste’	5343	6686

Table 2: Results of the analysis on Factiva

5.2. Narratives and topics of the European elections of 2014

During the European elections of 2014, three parties were significant participants in the campaign: The governing Parti Socialiste (PS), the conservative Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP) and the far-right Front National (FN). From these competing parties, certain actors were crucial in setting the discourse surrounding their campaigns.

First, whilst the French president François Hollande of the PS was not instrumental for the campaign, his general secretary Jean-Cristophe Cambadélis led the bid to win the elections. His speech for the opening of the campaign in April of 2014 set the topics and tonality of the campaign for the left wing party (Parti Socialiste, 2014).

Interestingly, his speech was largely focused on European topics. Whilst the French perspective was still an important element, it was mainly European problems and solutions that Cambadélis put the emphasis on. The narrative of the speech was one of crisis versus growth as the central political conflict of the elections. Cambadélis built this narrative in the speech by framing all the topics through this conflict and putting responsibility for the current situation in the EU on the EPP, its national leaders and specifically the Spitzenkandidat of the European People’s Party (EPP) Juncker. At the same time, he framed Martin Schulz as the counterpart in his narrative, as the protector of the people against the EPP during the crisis and the program of the PES as the only available solutions to overcome the crisis.

Central topics in his speech were economic and social policy on the EU level, including imposed austerity, monetary and fiscal policy like convergence criteria, French security policy and new projects on the EU level in areas like security, energy, transport, technology and agriculture. The emphasis in connection with all these topics was on a decidedly EU friendly narrative that contrasted the reform plans of the Party of European Socialists (PES) as a clear

contrast to the conservative agenda that the EU had supposedly been under during the leadership of EPP controlled institutions, like the Council and the Commission.

Most importantly for this analysis, Cambadélis specifically went into detail about the significance of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure. Not only did he emphasise the role of Martin Schulz as the Spitzenkandidat of the PES during the election campaign, he also specifically framed the whole procedure as a decisive moment in EU integration, as the system would enable the European people to choose their president of the Commission for the first time. Thus, he specifically connected the procedure with the perceived democratic deficit of the EU institutions and connected the campaign of the PS in France with their European lead candidate and their European program for the elections. This narrative can be interpreted as a clear attempt at politicising the Spitzenkandidaten procedure by framing the elections as the only legitimate way to designate the next EC president and by positioning Martin Schulz as the only sensible candidate through his previous role and accomplishments at the European level as president of the EP.

Notably, this was also reinforced by the fact that Martin Schulz was present during this event and held a speech in French as well, as he is fluent in the language (Parti Socialiste, 2014). The focus on the leadership figure of Schulz could also be emphasised through the slogan that was present at the event: 'Martin, c'est mon candidat'. In his speech, Schulz focused more on personal stories, rather than policy and strategy to emphasise his personal connections with France and the EU and laude the accomplishments of the EU as a peace project in connection with his personal story. This strong connection of the European elections in France with the Spitzenkandidaten procedure and the candidate for the PES Schulz may have been due to the context of the event. By having Schulz as a prominent guest at the starting event, this focus on the Spitzenkandidaten procedure (or rather on the candidate) may have reinforced itself. Making the event campaign about his person and candidacy may have been at the same time due to the fact that he was present as it was meant to set the tone of the PS during the election campaign in France.

In addition to this event, the role of president Hollande needs to be analysed. Even though he was not very prominent for the campaign due to his role as president, Hollande also took part in the public discourse by having an essay published in the newspaper *Le Monde* shortly before the elections (Hollande, 2014). The essay can be understood as an intervention at a time when the FN and UMP polled much better shortly before the election took place. The fact that both lead candidates of the FN and UMP, Marine Le Pen and Jean-François Copé directly referenced the essay in following speeches, clearly shows that the text was influential for the public debate,

as intended. The narrative of Hollande's essay followed more the ideational origins of the EU and put the strong claim out that the EU as a peace project in the wake of the world wars was at danger by demagogic and nationalistic forces. Hollande focused the essay less on topics of policy and more as a stark warning against the French choosing to leave the EU by reinforcing the own successes of working within the EU during the financial and the Euro crisis. He pointed out positive effects of membership in the EU in connection with the diminishing position and power of France in a globalised world. By framing France as a significant actor with its own choice within the EU but as an insignificant actor in the world, he clearly put an EU-friendly emphasis in the essay. However, the fact that he reinforces the ability of France to act independently and voluntarily in the EU also shows sensitivity towards EU-sceptic claims, as nonfactual as they might be. Importantly, the Spitzenkandidaten procedure was not at all mentioned in the essay. This could point towards the perceived insignificance of the topic for the overall potential to mobilise EU-friendly voters by the leadership of the PS in France, countering impressions from the beginning of the campaign.

Summarising the campaign by the PS, the narrative focused on the PS being the only sensible actor to represent France in the EU and overcome the economic and financial crisis in France and Europe as a whole. Many topics on the EU level and of French politics were covered. The Spitzenkandidaten procedure was also taken up as a topic in the campaign and was framed in an EU-friendly way. However, even though the Spitzenkandidaten procedure was part of the campaign, the fact that it did not feature in all the analysed documents points towards the conclusion that the leadership of the PS did not deem it to be significant in mobilising voters for the campaign.

Opposing the PS, both the centre-right UMP and the far-right FN had their campaign focused on the perceived weaknesses and negligence of the PS. Lead candidate and head of the conservative UMP Jean-François Copé held a speech for the closing event of the UMP campaign in Paris that gives a good overview of the topics and narratives that the conservative's campaign was focused on.

Jean-François Copé lays out a remarkably similar narrative for the UMP compared to the PS (Les Républicains, 2014). On one hand, he sets the tone by putting the following claim in the centre of his speech: being part of the EU would be more beneficial for France than leaving the EU. On the other hand, he also puts forward the UMP as the only party that could represent French interests in the EU and world. He puts this in contrast to the PS, which, he claims, had allowed France to become less influential over time. However, in contrast to the program of the PS, Copé framed these points almost exclusively through a domestic perspective. Almost all

topics, including economic and tax policies, foreign policy, and border protection, were presented from the French perspective and framed as issues that the PS would not be capable of solving. Interestingly, Martin Schulz as the Spitzenkandidat of the PES on the European level was also directly connected with domestic policy, as Copé positioned him as a supporter of the social reforms by former German chancellor Schröder that would also be part of the reforms by the PS if they won. The framing is quite undefined in the speech, but stands in clear connection to the critique of domestic policy of Hollande and the PS.

Even though the narrative overall was EU-friendly, Copé also saw large areas of critique and the need for reforms in the European project. He pointed out too much regulation, a lack of common foreign and defence policy, and the Schengen system as the main points of disagreement and in need of reform. Quite clearly, he still framed this as an EU-friendly critique, even though some pain points, like the lack of border protection sounded quite similar to the framing of the far-right FN, as will be shown below.

In summary, the Spitzenkandidaten procedure was not a central part of the campaign by the UMP. Copé only mentioned the lead candidate of the PS on the side and did not clearly connect it to an attempt at polarising the debate.

Marine Le Pen of the far-right FN was her party's figure head during the campaign. She was the lead candidate and the central figure, standing at the helm of the campaign. Most importantly, her speeches for the first of May and the closing event of her campaign give a good account of the topics and narratives the campaign of the FN was focused on (FranceOutreMer, 2014; Rassemblement National, 2014).

The narrative of the FN followed closely the populist playbook of 'the people' versus 'the elites'. The narrative essentially boiled down to a conflict between the French people versus the unelected bureaucrats in the EU, the dominant powers in control, Germany and the US, and the established French parties that would not act in the interest of the French people. Importantly, the classical left and right divide of political conflict was treated by Marine Le Pen as irrelevant. She framed true political contest for this election to be between patriotic and unpatriotic French citizens. She positioned a victory by the FN as the only possible way to end foreign control of France by leaving or dissolving the EU.

All topics that were mentioned during the speeches were clearly framed in line with this narrative. She states that all problems were caused by control from the EU and could only be solved by leaving or dissolving it. Among the topics, migration and economic issues were presented most prominently. From her point of view, the following issues were most important: First, the EU and the Schengen system prohibits the MS to control their borders properly and

also favours immigration. In the view of the FN, this then led to religious conflict, foreigners profiting from the French social system, and loss of identity and culture of the nation states. At the same time, the EU prohibits the MS to protect their industries from the effects of globalisation and favouring consumption of local products, leading to deindustrialisation and unemployment for the working class. Marine Le Pen put the blame for these developments on the established French parties, the UMP and the PS, by framing them as ‘francosceptic’. By this framing she meant that these established parties would not stand up to the unelected bureaucrats in Brussels and the dominant powers of Germany, which supposedly controls the European and French economy, and the US, which controls French foreign policy.

In the context of unelected bureaucrats, Marine Le Pen also mentioned the European lead candidates Juncker and Schulz. Claiming that neither candidate had French interests in mind, she framed them as unelected bureaucrats in the meaningless political contest of left versus right. This points towards an attempt by Le Pen to politicise the Spitzenkandidaten procedure through polarisation. The framing of the political contest between left and right as inconsequential and of no interest to the patriotic French voters could be seen as an attempt at delegitimising the procedure. This is in line with the eurosceptic narrative of the FN as part of the tan side of the political divide as expected by Postfunctionalism.

In summary, the election campaigns under investigation in this analysis showed to a certain extent that the Spitzenkandidaten procedure was part of the debates. This could point towards some salience of the topic, but it should be regarded as insignificant when compared to other topics in the election. Both actors from the opposition and the government were using the topic to a certain extent in their narratives, meaning that actor expansion as an aspect of politicisation according to Hutter and Grande (2014) can be seen as fulfilled. In addition, polarisation along the conflict lines gal/tan was also partially given. Whilst the FN represented the extreme tan side of the divide in their Eurosceptic framing of the issue, the UMP on the moderate tan side had trouble to position itself and the Spitzenkandidaten in this political conflict and attempted to frame it in the traditional left/right divide of political conflict. The PS was in a similar position as a traditional social democratic party. Their framing was also influenced by the classic left/right divide, but it also used heavy EU-friendly elements to position the system and the candidate, pointing towards a gal side identification. As a result, polarisation of the topic overall could be observed to a certain extent.

However, the position of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure in the narratives of the campaigns was not very prominent in all cases. Topics like economic, social and migratory issues outweighed the topic of leadership selection in importance for all investigated parties. This also



goes in accordance with the analysis of the salience of the topic in the media discourse analysed earlier. In 2014, the Spitzenkandidaten procedure was not relevant for the public debate and the narratives of the campaigns of major parties under investigation. This corresponds with the expectations of the hypothesis, explaining the fact that the Spitzenkandidaten procedure was successful in 2014 due to a lack of politicisation of the subject on the national level.

### 5.3. Narratives and topics of the European elections of 2019

In the context of higher salience of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure in the media and public debate, as analysed above, the election campaigns of the two major actors in the European elections of 2019 have to be seen in a different light than in 2014. First of all, the actors involved had changed to a certain extent. Both UMP and PS, traditionally significant parties in the French party landscape had declined in significance and could only achieve minor results in the European elections. In contrast to that, Marine Le Pen and the now renamed Rassemblement National (RN) had remained a significant actor in French politics. Her primary opponent was the French president Emmanuel Macron and his party La République En Marche! (LREM). Marine Le Pen remained the clear figure head of her party during the elections, even though she was not the French lead candidate. The lead candidate of the RN was Jordan Bardella, a close confidant to Marine Le Pen. Despite his role as lead candidate, Le Pen took over the role as front person of the campaign (Berteloot, 2018). With her as the central actor of the campaign, a selection of Le Pen's speeches during the campaign will be the basis of the following analysis of narratives and topics.

With the renaming of the party from Front National to Rassemblement National, came also a slight change in narratives about the EU (Barbière, 2019). Whilst the narrative of a France controlled by the supranational EU remained, the suggested solution by the RN was not French exit from the EU. In this regard, the narrative of the RN became much more tame and a little less EU-sceptic in general. The main point of the RN in its manifest was the dissolution of the supranational elements of the EU, mostly focused on the EC. The central ambition of the RN was the idea of a creation of an alliance of European nations instead of the EU, where people and their governments would take back control on the European level. Despite this significant change, the topics and the overall themes that the narrative was constructed around stayed mostly the same.

In terms of topics, the EU and specifically the EC, was framed to be blamed for the failures and problems surrounding the EU Member states and France in particular from the perspective of the RN. Protection of borders, stopping of globalisation and its effects, and orienting foreign

policy towards taking part in the multipolar world order, replacing it with hegemony by the US, were the main topics that were pushed in the narrative. All of it was once again framed in the perspective of foreign powers taking control of France (Rassemblement National, 2019a).

Interestingly, whilst the focus was still firmly on France, there was a much higher emphasis on framing the elections as European. The presentation of the manifest in Strasbourg was mostly dedicated to European topics (Rassemblement National, 2019b). And especially during a rally in Italy shortly before the elections in May, where far-right representatives from many different MS assembled, Marine Le Pen reinforced this European element and understanding of the program by addressing Italians and other nations directly (Balmer, 2019; Le Pen, 2019). Of course, Marine Le Pen held these speeches in European contexts and partly for European audiences. In this context, the frame of a national struggle against foreign control was still prevalent. This was specifically the case in Italy, where Le Pen addressed the Italian people repeatedly directly.

In addition, there was also a French domestic politics element to the election campaign. During the closing event, Marine Le Pen also addressed the challenge by the RN to president Macron's policies (Rassemblement National, 2019a). Especially the economic policies of the centrist government were framed as particularly damaging to the French people. As a result, she claimed that the success of the RN during the elections would also serve to give the president and his government a feeling for the disagreement of the French people with their economic policies.

However, despite heavily framing the EC as the institution mainly responsible for the problems of France and Europe and heavily advocating for its dissolution, neither the Spitzenkandidaten procedure nor any lead candidate were mentioned once in the speeches under investigation. The heavy politicisation of the supranational institution of the EC in the narrative of the RN was significant and this points towards the heavy populist framing of the EU and the positioning of the RN on the tan side of the political conflict, similar to its position in the 2014 elections. Yet, not mentioning the Spitzenkandidaten procedure or any candidate is a sign that despite the increasing salience of the topic in the media discourse, the RN and Marine Le Pen did not see electoral profitability in taking up the topic in the election campaign. This is, to a certain extent, opposed to the campaign for the European elections of 2014, where the names of the candidates were at least mentioned and the system polarised in the anti-establishment framing against the campaigns of traditional French parties, like the PS and UMP, by the FN.

On the opposite side of the EU-sceptic and far-right narrative by the RN corresponding to the tan side, stood the campaign of French president Macron and his LREM party. Macron had for

some time constructed a very pro-EU set of messages that firmly put the campaign of his party for the European elections on the gal side of the conflict. As a result, the choice of documents is as follows: whilst there is only one significant document from the time frame of the election campaign, the selection of documents reflects a clear formation of the narrative over time through its key events (García & Oleart, 2022). The selection of documents thus is listed as follows to reflect the formation and presentation of narratives of Macron's EU plans: First, the much cited Sorbonne speech in 2017, followed by the speech before the EP in 2018, a year before the elections. The essay that was published in all languages and all MS of the EU in May of 2019, during the hottest phase of the election campaign, reflects this formation of narrative and messages over time, as will be shown in the following paragraphs.

One of the most significant speeches by Macron establishing his narrative for the EU, is the Sorbonne speech of 2017 (Élysée, 2017b). Whilst he had already held speeches on his EU policies before, this speech is widely considered to be a public manifestation of the overall narrative and topics that Macron deems important for the future of the EU (García & Oleart, 2022). Overall, the central narrative of Macron can be simplified to 'Make Europe Great Again' (García & Oleart, 2022). In all forms of communication that were studied in preliminary research and are included in this analysis, the narrative was constructed from this argument: The European Union (or Europe, as Macron and many French politicians like to conflate the two terms) is in danger from nationalist forces and the only way to save it is through democracy, unity and sovereignty, all of which the current EU seriously lacks. All of these points were constructed from the perspective of Europe possessing a common cultural element that is found in these elements.

In connection with these three main points, Macron suggested areas in which the current EU needs to be reformed. In terms of sovereignty, the topic of migration and border protection was again taken up, as it was a decisive topic throughout both 2014 and 2019 European elections in France (Schüberl, Kelbel, & Navarro, 2020). In line with the pro-EU narrative, Macron established a centric view that is in line with expectations of gal positioning in the political conflict over EU integration. He advocated for clear European solutions connected with major reform for these issues. These demands were also embedded in the framing of the topics by putting them in line with his narrative of reforming the EU in order to save it. Similarly, topics of economic and monetary policy were positioned opposite of the demands from the RN, polarising the debate in the process. Topics like a common foreign policy of the EU and a common budget for the EU were opposing the EU-sceptic perspective of the RN, as the RN

would see these topics to go against their narrative of a Europe of nations and ‘taking back control’.

In terms of unity, this framing was also the case for the topics: supporting cultural exchange projects to foster unity between the peoples of Europe, harmonising taxation systems in the EU and incorporating solidarity between MS in the Single Market. All of these topics were central to an EU-friendly narrative pointing towards significant reform of the system of the EU. This positioning was central to opposing the narratives established by the RN and can be understood as contributing to polarising the discourse on the EU before the elections.

Most significant for the analysis of the discourse is definitely the narrative on democracy in the EU established by Macron. This narrative stood in stark contrast to the previous points. Similarly to the narrative of the radical right, Macron also saw a democratic deficit in the current EU structure. He established that the EU was created as separated from the people and in order to save the EU from nationalist forces, a proper European democracy would need to be established. In order to establish a European democracy, a true European demos, debate and dialogue around the elections would be necessary (Élysée, 2017a, 2018). He used this framing to establish his suggested reform in this context as the establishment of true European elections only possible through the introduction of transnational lists (Élysée, 2017b). In this context, he also mentioned the Spitzenkandidaten procedure. He framed it in light of the still lacklustre democratic dimension of the EU, like the EU elections. In his mind, the elections represented a democratic element that did not go far enough and did not allow for true democracy in the EU. In this light he also saw the Spitzenkandidaten procedure: a move in the right direction without solving the problem at the heart of the EU. In his opinion, the procedure was once again not a truly democratic system, as the decision was in the hand of the European parties and not in the hand of the voters directly. He said that in order for the procedure to work, the reform would need to be taken all the way, towards true European elections. As a result, he saw the Spitzenkandidaten procedure as not working due to the underlying system and wanted to push the reform in a different direction by establishing transnational lists. By framing the Spitzenkandidaten procedure in light of the democratic deficit debate, this attempt can be seen as an attempt at politicising the procedure.

However, this argument against the Spitzenkandidaten procedure is not persistent throughout the political communication of Emmanuel Macron leading up to the European elections of 2019. Whilst the argument for transnational lists persisted throughout his speeches, this topic was not used in the context of democracy for the essay that was published shortly before the elections of 2019 (Élysée, 2019). Democracy was still a topic included in the essay, but the

form and suggestions changed during the election campaign. As the suggestion for transnational lists for the European elections of 2019 failed in the EP (Barbière, 2018), Macron adopted a new project for popular participation in the EU: the conference on the future of Europe including citizens' panels and discussions. As a result, the topics of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure or transnational lists in the context of European democracy were left aside in this instance. Still, this idea of popular participation was also framed in a similar way as other topics in his democratic narrative. Taking back control for the people was very clearly stated here and represented a similar narrative as used by the RN in this context, but coupled with a radically different, EU-friendly sentiment.

In summary, Macron incorporated the topic of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure in his narrative concerning the development of EU democracy. However, this was not consistent throughout the communication for the election campaign in 2019. Other topics, like transnational lists and the conference on the future of Europe were much more consistent and dominant in their position within the narrative of democracy in the campaign by Macron.

Consequentially, looking at the narratives and topics of the election campaigns for the European elections in 2019 by French president Emmanuel Macron and his rival Marine Le Pen, the politicisation of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure cannot be established as relevant. In contrast to 2014, the salience of the topic in the media and public debate was significantly higher. However, on the level of election campaigns, the topic was not brought up more often, as would be expected by a higher salience of the topic in the public debate. Even though Macron put an emphasis on the narrative surrounding democratic deficit of the EU and Marine Le Pen once again emphasised the EC as a root-cause of the problems of the EU and its MS, the Spitzenkandidaten procedure was largely absent as a topic from these frames and narratives. This would indicate that the actors and parties did not expect the Spitzenkandidaten procedure to generate significant voting power and thus largely left out the topic from their narratives.

In terms of polarisation, interestingly, both the arguments by Macron and Le Pen surrounding European democracy were remarkably similar. Both argued for a significant democratic deficit of the EU as a whole and especially the supranational institutions. They also ascribed the EP and the European elections a significant role in changing this fact. Their view on changing the status quo and giving back control of the EU to the people were significantly different though. Macron emphasised the purpose of the EU and suggested to only change the way voters could influence the system by establishing a 'true' European democracy. Marine Le Pen wanted to radically change the EU by getting rid of supranational structures like the EC and establishing the EP and EUCO as the central venues to cooperate within a European alliance of nation states.

However, this did not involve a polarised discussion on the Spitzenkandidaten procedure. Marine Le Pen never directly mentioned it in the documents under investigation and Emmanuel Macron only discussed it well before the elections in his Sorbonne speech.

In summary, no significant politicisation of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure in the election campaigns in France of 2019 could be established in this analysis.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

Summarising the findings from the empirical analysis above, polarisation of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure did not occur in France during the European elections of 2014 and 2019, as far as could be established from the discourse analysis. Looking into the salience according to the quantitative media analysis, salience of the topic increased significantly from 2014 to 2019. However, this stands in contrast to the political campaigns and documents analysed in the discourse analysis. The topic of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure was rarely picked up when compared to other topics and frames during the campaign. Thus, politicisation of the topic by the important political parties during 2014 or 2019 could not be observed, even though it was picked up on occasions by both government and opposition parties and was also polarised accordingly. Thus, the analysis could not find a significant change in salience, actor expansion nor polarisation of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure itself from the campaigns in France from 2014 to 2019. On the contrary, if the minimal amount of significance the topic played during the campaigns had mattered, the result would rather be that the topic was tendentially more polarised and picked up by a wider variety of actors during 2014 compared to 2019.

As a result, domestic politicisation of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure during the election campaigns of 2019 could not have led to the status of ‘constrained dissensus’ in the EUCO, which was deduced to be the reason behind the failure of the procedure in the EUCO. This means that the hypothesis on the basis of PF has to be rejected. The contrasting events of 2014 and 2019 could not be explained by PF on the basis of politicisation.

Of course, the findings are also limited to a certain extent by difficult choices in developing the research design. First, this analysis is based solely on empirical findings from France. There is no context of the overall politicisation of the topic in other countries and this might influence the overall picture of the European elections of 2014 and 2019 in the EU as a whole. Still, the argument for the representativeness of France in connection with this study stands, as France presented a combination of factors that can strongly be considered to serve as a good case to be studied. Second, whilst the operationalisation of politicisation works as intended, there is no clear methodology as to study the success of this politicisation by political actors, as there is no data that could show the influence of politicisation of specific topics on the election results from 2014 and 2019. The connection between politicisation and election results also plays into the question of a testable causal connection between domestic politicisation and constraining dissensus in general that will be addressed in the following paragraphs. In this regard, the

question was simply avoided by taking constraining dissensus and its influence on the supranational decision making process as a given result of domestic politicisation in 2019 in contrast to 2014. However, it seems that emphasising the need to address this question in the future is an important insight from this thesis.

Coming back to the research question formulated at the beginning of the thesis, the empirical analysis could not offer a direct answer to the question. As constraining dissensus on the basis of domestic politicisation of the topic could not be the root cause for the perceived failure of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure in 2019 when compared to its success in 2014, the question remains unanswered by the help of PF.

However, the result of the thesis is not diminished in this way. First of all, as established at the beginning of the thesis, the question under consideration is closely connected to PF and the politicisation literature. Thus, the theory should be able to offer some degree of explanation of the question. By failing the test in the empirical analysis, the theory can be considered to be heavily weakened. This is a significant result of the research performed here.

If the assumption of the general situation of constrained dissensus on the basis of domestic politicisation of the topic after the elections of 2019 stands and the rejection of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure due to this condition is accepted, then this could not have happened through domestic politicisation of the topic. The empirical analysis showed that there was no significant domestic politicisation of the topic. In this way and in this specific case, the central argument at the basis of PF and the politicisation literature does not hold, as there could be no causal connection between domestic politicisation and constraining dissensus. This potentially evokes the question whether the theory as a whole can offer any significant explanation of the European integration process. At the very least, it could provoke the notion that PF will need to be further developed if it cannot be applied to this case.

Second, if the state of constraining dissensus based on the general and non-issue specific character of politicised election campaigns in 2019 is accepted, then there cannot be a causal connection between domestic politicisation, constraining dissensus and the rejection of the Spitzenkandidaten in 2019 in contrast to 2014. How could a connection between these elements be established and tested, when the argument is based on the lack of issue-specificity, as is suggested in the politicisation literature? In both scenarios, PF cannot offer an explanation for this significant event in European integration.

This also follows in general arguments brought forward by existing criticism around the theory. Primarily, critics of the theoretical framework have often called the testability of PF in question due to the lack of a testable and causal connections between domestic politicisation and



constraining consensus (Moravcsik, 2018). This was clearly also encountered here. First, whilst domestic politicisation is well defined and its operationalisation is clear, the same does not apply to constraining dissensus. The concept floats in the air and is not clearly defined by the authors or the connected literature. It is meant by the authors to represent a general state of politics in the EU (Hooghe & Marks, 2020). There is little explanation on the concrete consequences of constraining dissensus for the decision making processes and actions by actors on the supranational sphere from the literature, other than that the decision-making is constrained in certain cases by a wider range of positions. In consequence, operationalising and measuring constraining dissensus is difficult. This was circumvented here by making an assumption about the existence of constraining dissensus after the elections of 2019 and its influence on the outcome of the leadership selection process, in contrast to the lack of constraining dissensus after the elections of 2014. Considering the findings of the empirical analysis and the general state of politicisation of both the 2014 and 2019 elections, as shown in the literature, this assumption needs to be questioned.

Second, there is little literature and research on the precise connection between domestic politicisation and the consequences of constrained dissensus on the European decision making process. There are no answers to questions of how specifically politicisation influences decisions on the supranational level or how the politicisation of specific topics at the domestic level can lead to successful changes on the supranational level. More concrete research into these areas of PF and the politicisation literature, like the work of Schimmelfennig (2020) on politicisation management, would be valuable additions to the academic debates in these fields. Taken together, both elements open up new questions that are so far not satisfactorily answered in the according literature: when can politicisation be called successful? Is there a causal link between domestic politicisation and the state of decision making on the EU level? How and why can domestic politicisation lead to certain actions of national and European leaders on the supranational or intergovernmental sphere? How exactly does constraining dissensus influence decision-making on the EU level?

Looking into the not-so-distant future of the European Parliament elections of 2024, both PF as a theory of European integration and the Spitzenkandidaten procedure as a tool of leadership selection could be brought to life again. On one hand, delving into questions behind the viability of PF in explaining the direction and development of European integration is an important future research project to contribute to the theoretical debate on the topic. On the other hand, empirical analysis of the next European elections will be fascinating by looking into the potential direction of EU integration in the context of the ever-lasting EU in crisis. As new

topics like the Covid pandemic and its effects, global economic and technological interdependence, effects of digitalisation, and security policy have become dominant in the public discourse in the EU over the past months, the concept of politicisation will continue to play an important role in studying European integration. And whilst it failed in 2019, the elections of 2024 could bring new aspects and data to the debate on the Spitzenkandidaten procedure. Looking at the longing of European citizens for more direct involvement and the opinion of the current EC President on the matter, there is life in the old dog yet (von der Leyen, 2019).

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