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Press Release

Mannheim social scientists: lead candidates make Europe more democratic

European election study investigates electoral campaigns of Juncker, Schulz and other candidates for post of EU Commission President / Findings reveal positive impact on turnout

The European Union's decision to ask each of the political groups to nominate a lead candidate (Spitzenkandidat) for the post of EU Commission President in the run-up to the 2014 European elections represented an important first step towards greater democracy in Europe. That is the conclusion reached by a study carried out by the Mannheim Centre for European Social Research (MZES) at the University of Mannheim and the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).

Nomination of lead candidates intended to boost turnout and increase legitimacy

Candidates for the post of EU Commission President included Jean Claude Juncker for the European People's Party (EPP), Martin Schulz for the Party of European Socialists (PES) and Guy Verhofstadt for the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE). The declared goal of the EU was to present voters with a clear choice of alternatives and encourage them to take a greater interest in European elections. In doing so, it hoped to attract more attention to EU politics and increase levels of participation in the election, thereby reducing the EU's democratic deficit and helping tackle the related problem of legitimacy.

"European Election Studies" (EES): More than 30,000 voters surveyed in 28 different countries

Working with colleagues from all 28 EU member states, Mannheim political scientists Professor Hermann Schmitt and Sebastian Popa gathered huge amounts of data on the 2014 European elections and spent months evaluating it. In particular the international research team carried out elaborate post-election sample surveys in all EU member states as part of the "European Election Studies" (EES), which have been coordinated by the University of Mannheim since 1979. Approximately 1,100 voters in each country were interviewed about their voting behaviour – a total sample size of more than 30,000.

In their recently published study based on this data, Schmitt, Popa and their London colleague Sara Hobolt come to the conclusion that the electoral campaign waged by the lead candidates actually did have the desired effect. Personalization of the election significantly increased the likelihood of an individual taking part in the voting process. "In the case of Schulz, for



example, recognizing him increased the likelihood of an individual casting his or her vote by 37 percent,” commented Hermann Schmitt. The effects were similar for those who recognized Jean-Claude Juncker.

For the first time, no decline in turnout

The campaign events organised by the lead candidates in the individual countries also proved effective: Voters in the countries visited by the candidates were more likely to go to the polls than in countries that were not visited. This was particularly true of the visits paid by the “classic” candidates Schulz and Verhofstadt, who sought direct contact with voters, according to Sebastian Popa. Juncker, by contrast, tended to target his meetings at national politicians and concentrated more on press briefings and gala dinners. “One can perhaps conclude that this was with an eye to securing a possible appointment to the Presidency of the Commission after the election,” adds Schmitt. “But this tactic did not significantly boost the overall turnout.”

At first glance the nomination of the candidates did not change the level of interest in the 2014 election, with only around 43 percent of electors actually casting a vote – roughly the same figure as for the previous election in 2009. If the turnout in Croatia is excluded – because it was taking part in a European election for the first time and only one in four voters actually went to the poll – then there was a minimal increase to 44 percent. Both figures are, however, significant, as participation in European elections has been declining since 1979. So perhaps there is now a turnaround taking place in participation levels in European elections caused by the nomination of lead candidates?

‘Schulz effect’ is disputed

The research team is cautious in its interpretation of the results. After all, even the most popular candidates – Juncker and Schulz – were only properly recognized by about one voter in five. In Germany, voter turnout may have increased by almost five percentage points since 2009, but it is doubtful whether this was caused by a ‘Martin Schulz effect’ alone, as local elections held parallel to the European elections in several federal states probably also boosted turnout.

Schmitt’s conclusion is that the overall effect of the nomination of lead candidates was probably not particularly great: “But the competition between lead candidates will be more firmly established next time round, and voters may also have an ‘incumbent’ president to vote for, so candidates will increasingly be able to reach people who have hitherto shown little or no interest in the EU”. The researchers therefore conclude that the nomination of lead candidates does represent an important step towards greater democracy in Europe.

Further information and contact details:

Schmitt, Hermann, Sara Hobolt and Sebastian Popa: Does personalization increase turnout? Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 European Parliament elections. European Union Politics. DOI: 10.1177/1465116515584626

Website of the European Election Studies (EES): <http://eeshomepage.net/>



MZES project website "European Election Study 2014": <http://www.mzes.uni-mannheim.de/d7/en/projects/european-election-study-2014>

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