

Politicising the Union? - The Influence of 'Leading Candidates' for the Commission Presidency on the Role of Party Groups in the European Parliament

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Abstract

For the first time, so-called 'leading candidates', who represent and personify their respective party group in the European Parliament (EP), competed with rival agendas for the European Commission (Commission) Presidency in the campaign for the European elections in May 2014. This poses a new challenge to the Union's institutional design that is based on and characterised by a concept of institutional balance.

This thesis investigates to what extent competing 'leading candidates' enhance the process of deliberation and party contestation and thus strengthen the role of EP party groups. It is tested that the competition among 'leading candidates' (1) leads to EU-wide campaigns, (2) strengthens the profile of EP party groups and (3) improves the democratic and political standing of the EP vis-à-vis the Commission as well as the reputation of both institutions vis-à-vis the European Council. Given the fact that the European elections have not yet taken place, this work includes various assumptions and predictions that underline the experimental character of this project. In light of the example of the EP party group of the 'Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats' (S&D), the role of its 'leading candidate' Martin Schulz is framed in view of the debate on the democratic deficit and the institutional setting of the EU. His influence is analysed according to three criteria: (1) the number of (expected) seats for an EP party group, (2) the internal group cohesion and the ability to form majority coalitions as well as (3) the overall inter-institutional context.

During the election campaign the S&D and its 'leading candidate' Schulz succeeded in positioning themselves as a credible and united alternative to their challengers, which led to an EU-wide campaign. The S&D's election campaign enabled Schulz to positively shape and strengthen the public perception of his EP party group. Nonetheless, his influence on the structure of incentives inside the legislative with regard to internal party cohesion and coalition formation remained limited. In light of the inter-institutional context, the influence of an elected 'leading candidate' is regarded as a symbolic act which could deepen the relationship between the EP and

the Commission and could strengthen the democratic and political standing of both institutions vis-à-vis the European Council.