Who talks about the *Spitzenkandidaten* system.

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**ABSTRACT**: The Lisbon Treaty (2009) introduced key institutional changes to increase the relevance of elections to the European Parliament (EP). Among others, major political groups nominated different lead candidates, the so-called *Spitzenkandidaten*, for the 2014 EP elections. The aim of this paper is to investigate how national political parties—as main actors in EP elections—react to this new institutional setting. Using data from the 2014 Euromanifesto study, we examine if and under what conditions political parties put emphasis on the *Spitzenkandidaten* system in their party manifestos issued ahead of EP elections. Moreover, we are interested in finding out if parties take positive or negative stances when talking about it. Our findings reveal that parties put less emphasis on the issue than theoretically presumed. Factors promoting the salience of the *Spitzenkandidaten* topic in the EP election manifestos are a candidate’s country of origin, the support of an EP party group, and the party’s position towards the EU.

**KEYWORDS**: European Union; elections; European Parliament; *Spitzenkandidaten*; lead candidates; Manifesto data.
1. Introduction

The Lisbon Treaty (2009) introduced key institutional changes to increase the relevance of elections to the European Parliament (EP) (for a good overview see Corbett 2014, Hobolt 2014, and Christiansen 2016). Among others, major political groups nominated different lead candidates, the so-called *Spitzenkandidaten*, for the 2014 EP elections. Although the formulation within the treaty was rather ambiguous in this regard, it can roughly be summarized that the candidate of the winning party group is supposed to be elected by the majority of MEPs as President of the European Commission. After some negotiations between the actors of the EP and the heads of government of some member states in the aftermath of the 2014 EP elections, this was finally put into practice with the election of Jean-Claude Juncker as President of the European Commission. The theoretical idea behind this innovation was to give European elections, and consequently elected political actors, more weight in the European Union (EU) multi-level system of governance. This should to a certain degree contribute to the legitimacy issues of the EU. But did this institutional change indeed increase the relevance of elections to the EP? This question has been tackled from various perspectives. Schmitt et al. (2015), for example, study the voter’s side, showing that the *Spitzenkandidaten* issue actually affected citizens’ voting behavior to some degree. Schulze (2016) and Gattermann et al. (2016), on the other hand, investigate the election campaign coverage and mainly demonstrate that the *Spitzenkandidaten* were not widely visible.
Moreover, in a recent article, Christiansen (2016, p. 15-16) argues that the introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process “produced something of a supranational moment in the evolution of the EU’s institutional architecture”, but that these changes “hardly amount to the kind of critical juncture that would throw the Union off its established path”.

To sum up, although previous findings have shown that the changes introduced by the Lisbon Treaty had some if not decisive consequences on EP elections, we do not yet know whether and in what way parties took these institutional changes into account. Political parties are highly relevant in this regard since they are main political actors. They represent citizens’ views and issue positions, formulate election programs, run for elections, and organize election campaigns. Finally, representatives from these political parties are elected by the voters into the parliament. Certainly, elections to the European Parliament (EP) are different from national elections (Hix, 2005). For instance, whereas in national elections the party that gains the highest share of votes provides predominantly the head of the executive, this is not the case in EP elections, since an EU government as such does not exist. However, exactly this aspect changed significantly through the institutional changes introduced with the Lisbon Treaty. The results of the EP election will finally be taken into account for the election of the President of the European Commission or, as Hobolt (2014) aptly puts it:
“Whereas the President was previously chosen by a consensus of European leaders in the European Council which was approved by the European Parliament, the Lisbon Treaty stipulates that the European Council shall nominate a candidate ‘taking into account the elections to the European Parliament’, by qualified majority, and the parliament in turn must ‘elect’ the nominee with an absolute majority (Article 17 of the Treaty on the European Union [TEU]).”

Although the European Commission cannot be regarded as a proper government, it can be described as the “day-to-day executive of the EU” (Corbett, 2014). Consequently, the introduction of these new institutional arrangements is expected to have important implications for EP elections (Corbett, 2014; Hobolt, 2014, 2015; Treib, 2014). Due to the fact that the institutional rearrangement was not fully realized, for example with regard to the rather ambiguous wording of the treaty concerning the legitimate power of the EP to finally vote for the candidate, the actual behavior of political parties in their election campaigns is highly relevant at this stage.

Against this background, the general aim of our paper is to study if and under what conditions political parties did make use in their campaign of this new feature of political competition at the EU level of governance. Did they put emphasis on the *Spitzenkandidaten* system in their election manifestos? Did they frame it negatively or positively? Is it relevant for the parties’ support of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system
whether the candidate originally stems from the own country? The paper is structured as follows: To begin with, we discuss theoretically the role of political parties within the introduction of these institutional changes and summarize briefly the state of the art in order to derive our theoretical assumptions accordingly. Next, we run our empirical analysis comprising three steps: Using data from the 2014 Euromanifesto study (Schmitt et al., 2016), we first examine descriptively if and what kind of parties put emphasis on the *Spitzenkandidaten* in their party manifests issued ahead of EP elections. Then we analyze whether parties take positive or negative stances when talking about these lead candidates. Finally, we are interested in the factors determining the parties’ support of and position towards the *Spitzenkandidaten* system.

2. *Spitzenkandidaten* and (national) political parties

“EU politics is party politics. [...] Parties are the main actors in domestic elections, EP elections and referendums. They are the main organs connecting governments to parliaments and parliaments to voters.”

(Hix, 2005)

It is thus imperative to take into account political parties when studying the institutional changes introduced for the first time for the 2014 EP elections. These political actors had the opportunity to change the nature of their political campaigns in EP elections in such a way as to finally focus on pan-European issues instead of rather national ones. Or, to put it differently, “the treaty change opened the door for the European
party families to put forward leading candidates for the position of Commission President, giving the European electorate for the first time the opportunity to determine not only the composition of the European legislature, but also the leadership of the EU’s executive” (Christiansen, 2016, p. 2). In this line of reasoning, the parties’ key task within the 2014 EP elections would have been to promote the Spitzenkandidaten system in order to benefit from this unique opportunity. Political parties thus should have an intrinsic motivation to raise the stakes of EP elections as they compete for votes in these political contests. This is even more valid when taking into account the standard assumption concerning party competition at the EU level, i.e. that EP elections are still considered less significant second-order elections compared to national ones (Hix & Marsh, 2011; Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Schmitt, 2005; Schmitt & Toygür, 2016). It is at least for mainstream parties, by far less important to gain seats in EP elections than in the national parliament election. In this respect, the chance to have a president of the European Commission who ultimately represents the party should raise the relevance of these elections, since now there is more at stake than ever before in the history of EP elections. In this context, we can expect that political parties as well as the individual candidates running for a MEP seat are among the main promoters of the Spitzenkandidaten system.

To sum up, faced with the institutional innovation, parties had the opportunity to promote in their electoral programs the individual candidates and both the system and that could install “one of their own” as President of the European Commission. On the
other hand, the decision to address both topics has no apparent negative consequences. Accordingly, when confronted with how to address the *Spitzenkandidaten* topic in their manifestos, parties were faced with a strategic choice that had clear benefits and no apparent downside. In our opinion, political parties should thus have an incentive to promote this system since it offers the opportunity to enhance the legitimacy of the elections to the EP and consequently of the entire EU. There are not less than two important reasons for this – at least in theory: First, parties, as rational political actors, would want to express their support for both the system and the candidate that would put “one of their own” at the presidency of the European Commission. Second, as one of the main goals of the institutional innovation is to enhance the legitimacy of the EU, most parties should emphasize this innovation, while some would use it to further discredit the union\(^1\).

3. What do we know about the *Spitzenkandidaten* system in the 2014 EP elections?

Five of the seven party groups nominated *Spitzenkandidaten* before the EP elections in June 2014: Jean-Claude Juncker for the European People’s Party (EPP), Martin Schulz for the European Socialists (PES), Guy Verhofstadt for the Alliance of Liberals and

\(^1\) By refusing to nominate a candidate, the two Eurosceptic political groups, i.e. the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and the Europe for Freedom and Democracy (EFD), put themselves in the position of being the main critics of the system.
Democrats for Europe (ALDE), José Bové and Ska Keller for the European Green Party (EGP), and Alexis Tsipras for the European Left (EL). The Eurosceptic political groups, i.e. the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and the Europe for Freedom and Democracy (EFD), on the contrary, decided not to put forward candidates. The selection procedures for the candidates were more or less comparable among the different party groups (Put et al., 2016). With regard to their electoral campaign, the five candidates had a total budget of 4.5 million Euros, which was used, among others, for altogether nine televised debates between the Spitzenkandidaten, visits to classical campaigning events, and the promotion of their online presence (Pop, 2014; Schmitt & Teperoglou, 2015). Finally, we have already pointed out that the party groups are assumed to take a key position in promoting this new institutional arrangement. Interestingly, the EPP played a rather contradictory role in this regard: initially being one of the strongest proponents of the Spitzenkandidaten system, it increasingly changed its commitment into an opposing position with the 2014 elections approaching (Christiansen, 2016, p. 4).

But what do we know about the actual role and the impact of these Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 EP elections so far? Corbett (2014) opened the academic debate in this regard, raising the question whether the new institutional arrangements within the Lisbon Treaty may lead to a re-evaluation of the classification as second-order elections. His tentative answer is that EP elections will remain less important elections for the majority of voters, although he admits that the lead candidate system made
some difference in election campaigns: First of all, with some exceptions (e.g., the British Labour Party and the Italian Partito Democratico, which abstained from approving Martin Schulz as their candidate), most of the national parties were committed to the candidates of their group. Second, major country differences are observed: While, for example in Germany, televised debates between the candidates took place and attracted a considerable TV audience, in other countries almost none event could be observed. These findings are strengthened by the analysis of the EP election campaign coverage (Schulze, 2016). This three-country study (covering Germany, France, and the UK) concludes that little attention was paid to the Spitzenkandidaten in the coverage of the three countries under consideration. Nevertheless, similarly as in the above-mentioned studies, major country differences were striking in the coverage: whereas the British coverage of that topic was extremely low, French and German newspapers referred more frequently to the Spitzenkandidaten. Furthermore, the Spitzenkandidaten also had a substantive social media presence (Nulty et al., 2016).

More clear-cut findings on the question whether the innovation affected the 2014 EP elections can be drawn from more quantitative approaches. These studies most importantly show that country effects are at play: People were most knowledgeable of specific candidate names in the home countries of the Spitzenkandidaten. Moreover, citizens’ awareness of the fact that candidates were nominated varied strongly among countries (Hobolt, 2014; Schmitt et al., 2015). Making use of a EU-wide representative study, Schmitt et al. (2015) offer some additional findings, which show that the aware-
ness of the *Spitzenkandidaten* had a modest but statistically significant impact on turnout. To be more specific, the ability of citizens to recognize the *Spitzenkandidaten* and the campaign activities had an impact on their electoral participation. Although admitting that the effects are rather minor in this case, they assume that the effects could be more substantial in future elections given that this new institutional setting, implemented only for the first time, has neither been fully established yet nor clearly defined (in this latter aspect, they strongly agree with Corbett (2014) and Christiansen (2016)). Gattermann et al. (2016) point to similar conclusions, as they show that the amount of available information about the EP election campaign, but also about the EU in general, is an important precondition for citizens to develop a specific attitude towards the *Spitzenkandidaten*.

4. How do we assume political parties to behave in the context of the institutional changes?

As illustrated above, previous studies have shown that the launch of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system did not change the character of the EP election fundamentally. Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that it had some influence (Gattermann et al., 2016; Schmitt et al., 2015). By bringing political parties into the picture, our goal is to contribute to the understanding of the role of the *Spitzenkandidaten* in the 2014 EP
election. As outlined above, the national political parties are supposed to definitely have a motivation a) to emphasize the Spitzenkandidaten topic, and b) to frame the topic positively in their election platforms. Since there are several reasons why they would want to mention the Spitzenkandidaten, i.e., both their names and the system in general, the aim of the next section is to formulate theoretical assumptions in this regard.

**General Spitzenkandidaten emphasis:** An obvious question is why parties generally emphasize some issues and neglect others. This question was asked by numerous scholars, who generally agree that the party’s decision on the topics to be addressed in their election campaigns is as important as the position they take towards an issue (Green-Pedersen, 2007; Green & Hobolt, 2008; Meguid, 2008; Wagner & Meyer, 2014). To answer this question, most researchers go back to the theoretical foundations of salience theory, put forward by Budge and Farlie (1983), as well as issue ownership theory (Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik et al., 2003). According to these approaches, parties seek to shape their electoral campaign by emphasizing specific issues. Ideally, they put emphasis on issues that advocate the party’s strengths, while avoiding issues that do not focus their strong points but let rather benefit other parties. In doing so, a party will

2 It is important to note that not the EP party groups—and outside parliament, the transnational parties or party federations—compete for votes in EP elections, but the national political parties. The candidates to be elected as MEPs are nominated by the national political parties of each EU member state separately. Consequently, these actors are running in the election campaign and, in the majority of the cases, release their own election programs ahead of the EP elections—their so-called Euromanifestos (EMs).

3 At this point, it is important to note that we are not primarily interested in the mentions of specific candidates but rather of the system as a whole.
gain more votes if an issue in which it is perceived as competent is also salient to voters (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008). Hence, the (right) decision of emphasizing an issue in the electoral campaign can lead to a higher vote share, but it equally determines the “party system issue agenda and the topics that dominate political debate in general” (Wagner & Meyer, 2014). To put emphasis on the new institutional arrangements and the role of the Spitzenkandidaten within the 2014 EP elections could thus give the parties the possibility to change the second-order character of the elections, enhance democracy in the EU, and contribute to the fact that EP elections finally become genuine European contests. To sum up, the intrinsic motivation together with the theoretical arguments borrowed from salience theory lead to our first general assumption:

H1: Political parties running for EP elections emphasize the Spitzenkandidaten in their Euromanifestos and generally take a positive stance in this regard.

**EP party groups:** It might as well be the case that the rational motivation of some parties dictated them not to mention the Spitzenkandidaten or even to portray both the topic and the candidates in a negative light. It is true that most parties belonging to an EP party group which nominated a candidate did indeed actively campaign on behalf of the candidate. In this context, the case of Schulz is most illustrative, who greatly benefited from the extensive support of SPD in Germany and PSOE in Spain throughout the entire campaign (Garcia & Priestley, 2015). Thus, we can expect that the support of these parties is also reflected by more frequent and positive mentions
of the *Spitzenkandidaten* in the EMs. At the same time, parties belonging to the two Eurosceptic political groups that did not nominate a candidate, i.e., the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and the Europe for Freedom and Democracy (EFD), were in a position in which they could ignore the topic entirely, as it was not in their interest to “advertise” an institutional change that would—at least in theory— increase the legitimacy of the EU. Moreover, it could as well be the case that these parties took advantage of this opportunity to openly criticize both the idea of the *Spitzenkandidaten* and the individual candidates in order to further challenge the legitimacy of the EU. To sum up:

H2.1: Political parties belonging to the EP party groups that nominated a candidate are more likely to emphasize the *Spitzenkandidaten* in their Euromanifestos and take a more positive stance in this regard compared to the EP party groups that did not nominate a candidate.

Another point that needs to be taken into account, when considering the difference among European party groups, is their internal cohesion regarding the nomination of the individual candidates. Here, the EPP party group stands out as being the only party that followed an internally contested nomination procedure. While the other groups either had only one candidate (as in the case of PES, ALDE and EL)—who received broad support by a formal vote during the parties’ congress—or had nominated as candidates both contenders (as in the case of EGP), this did not apply to the EPP. In
this latter case, there was an open contest between Jean-Claude Juncker (supported by CSV from Luxembourg, CDU from Germany and ND from Greece) and Michel Barnier (supported by FIDESZ from Hungary and NSi from Slovenia) for the nomination of the group. This resulted in a rather close election during the Dublin party conference (6–7 March 2014), ultimately won by Junker with 382 votes, i.e., 61% of the total votes (Barnier only got 245), and had potential consequences for the cohesiveness of the EPP regarding the support for the *Spitzenkandidaten*. Thus, we generally expect that:

H2.2: Political parties belonging to the EPP party group are less likely to emphasize the *Spitzenkandidaten* topic in their Euromanifestos compared to the other EP groups which nominated a candidate.

**Position towards Europe**: As indicated before, the stance of the parties towards the European Union mattered for how they chose to cover the *Spitzenkandidaten* in their manifestos. To be more precise, the refusal of the two Eurosceptic groups to nominate a candidate put them in a position to either ignore or criticize this institutional change. Following the same rationale as described above, other parties that do not necessarily belong to the two Eurosceptic groups but have a critical or ambiguous position towards the EU are also not interested in praising an institutional change in their Euromanifestos which could increase the legitimacy of the EU. The point is that even parties belonging to an EP group that nominated a candidate can be in a position to ignore or even criticize the *Spitzenkandidaten*, depending on their anti-pro EU position. Most il-
Illustrative examples for this case are several parties from the *Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left* EP, which supported Alexis Tsipras. Even if their candidate is not clearly Eurosceptic, eight out of the 20 parties that belong to this group adopt Eurosceptic stances according to the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey data. Therefore, we would expect them to ignore or to be critical of the *Spitzenkandidaten*. Furthermore, this can also be the case for parties which have an ambiguous position towards the EU even if they are part of a clear-cut pro-EU EP group (i.e., ALDE, EPP and S&D). On the other hand, as this institutional innovation was designed to increase the legitimacy of the EU, parties that clearly support the EU have a higher incentive to promote the *Spitzenkandidaten* among their electorate and thus to also present the topic in a positive light in their manifestos. All in all, we expect that:

H3.1: The anti-pro EU position of a party is positively related to the degree to which the party emphasizes the *Spitzenkandidaten* in their Euromanifesto.

H3.2: The anti-pro EU position of a party is related to the stance towards the *Spitzenkandidaten* as reflected in their Euromanifesto.

**Party supporters’ position towards Europe**: In pursuing their electoral strategy, parties are constrained not only by their policy consideration but also by the position of their supporters. There is substantial research showing that the stances of party

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4 To be more specific, eight parties belonging to this group, i.e., Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, People’s Movement against the EU, Left Alliance, Left Front Sinn Fein, Socialist Party, Portuguese Communist Party and Left Party, have a score lower than 3 on the EU POSITION variable (measured on a scale ranging from 0 to 7) in the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey.
supporters have an influence on parties’ positions and on how these are reflected in electoral manifestos (Adams et al., 2014). This is particularly the case for EU-related stances (Popa & Dumitrescu, 2015; Steenbergen et al., 2007). Following the above logic, if party supporters are against the EU, the party might thus decide against emphasizing in their official document an institutional change that should at least in theory increase the legitimacy of the EU. Consequently:

H4.1: The anti-pro EU position of the party’s supporters is positively related to the degree to which the party emphasizes *Spitzenkandidaten* in their Euromanifesto.

H4.2: The anti-pro EU position of the party’s supporters is related to the stance towards the *Spitzenkandidaten* as reflected by their Euromanifesto.

**Governing parties:** Moreover, since EP elections do not lead to a parliament with the same rights and competencies as national elections, (some) parties may have an incentive to not mention this increase of competence in their EMs. This may apply in particular for parties holding a governing position in their own country, as these parties already exert influence on EU politics through the European Commission and the Council. This is what can be subsumed under the notion of “inter-institutional dynamics of the European Union” (Hobolt, 2014, p. 1533):

“[T]he introduction of *Spitzenkandidaten* can be seen as a very clear attempt by the European Parliament to enhance its own influence on the se-
lection of the Commission President. The Lisbon Treaty reserves the right to appoint the President of the European Commission to the European Council, and whereas the Treaty obliges the European Council to take into account the elections of the EP, the European Parliament cannot formally propose its own candidate, and national governments are under no legal obligation to pick any of the parties’ lead candidates.” (Hobolt, 2014, p. 1533)

Thus, governing parties have a certain incentive to deemphasize the Spitzenkandidaten issue and are supposed to take a rather skeptical stance towards it if mentioned in the EMs. This is because they fear a loss of power if the EP election result has consequences on the presidency of the European Commission. Accordingly, we assume that parties which are not part of a national government put more emphasis on the Spitzenkandidaten issue and have more positive stances towards it than parties in national governments.

H5.1: Non-governing parties put more emphasis on Spitzenkandidaten and take a more positive stance in comparison to governing parties.

Home country of Spitzenkandidaten: Furthermore, having learned about the pronounced differences among countries in terms of media coverage and the citizens’ awareness of the candidates from previous studies, we incorporate this finding in our analysis. It has been shown that people in the home countries of the Spitzenkandidaten
had the highest level of awareness of specific candidate names (Hobolt, 2014) and that the media coverage was higher in Germany and France (the home countries of the three candidates Martin Schulz, Ska Keller and José Bové) than in the UK (Schulze, 2016). This leads to our final assumption, accounting for possible country variation.

H6: In the home countries of the candidates (i.e., Luxembourg, Germany, Belgium, France, and Greece), the salience of the Spitzenkandidaten in the Euromanifestos is higher and the framing more positive.

5. Methods and data

In order to test our assumptions, we make use of the EES 2014 Euromanifesto Study (Schmitt et al. 2016). The study collected all manifestos of the relevant parties competing in the 2014 EP elections, which are digitized in a machine-readable format and then manually coded by country experts. For coding we employ an updated version of the Euromanifestos Coding Scheme (EMCS) (see Braun et al., 2015). This coding scheme is an extension of the one used by the MARPOR (former MRG/CMP) project, though the Euromanifesto coding scheme clearly focuses on the content of EP elections instead of national election manifests of political parties. Our final data set consists of the coded manifestos of the 199 relevant parties (the number also includes the

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5 As relevant parties, we define the parties that gained at least one seat in the previous two EP elections.

6 The EMCS IV coding scheme, which was used for the coding of the 2014 Euromanifestos, can be accessed together with the EM data 2014 (Schmitt et al., 2016).
six manifestos of the EP party groups) across the 28 EU member states in the 2014 EP elections. Making use of this data, we can measure both the attention (i.e., emphasis) that parties devote to the Spitzenkandidaten topic and the position they take in this regard.

But what do we actually measure when using this kind of data? In line with manifesto research, it can be assumed that issues which are emphasized by political parties in their manifestos are to a large extent consistent with the policies they advocate in parliaments and governments (Braun et al., 2016; Budge et al., 2001; Wüst & Schmitt, 2007). Moreover, they are also the campaign documents that are most likely to represent the collective internal expression of a party (Ceron, 2012). Furthermore, in the elaboration of their manifestos, parties consider the stances of their supporters in general and on European issues in particular (Adams et al., 2014; Popa & Dumitrescu, 2015). Consequently, despite the common criticism that manifestos are drafted by a rather small group of experts within a party, we can act on the assumption that the content of election manifestos reflects the official position a party covers on a specific issue. In our case, the space a party dedicates to the Spitzenkandidaten thus reflects the general relevance of this topic for the party.

**Dependent variables:** In order to measure emphasis, we calculate the proportion of the party manifestos that parties devote to the Spitzenkandidaten topic. As mentioned previously, the space a party devotes to a certain issue in its manifesto is indicative of
the salience of the given issue for the party (see for example Budge et al., 2001). It needs to be mentioned that we differentiate in our coding scheme between the *Spitzenkandidaten* as a general issue and the mentions of the specific candidates.\(^7\) For the purpose of this paper, we merged the two sub-categories (i.e. *Spitzenkandidaten* as general issue and the mentions of the specific candidates.), as they both reflect the attention that parties give to the *Spitzenkandidaten* system in general. Thus, our first dependent variable, i.e., *Spitzenkandidaten* salience, captures the attention that parties devote to the issue in general. To measure our second dependent variable, i.e., the position that parties take on the *Spitzenkandidaten*, we make use of the difference between the negative and positive mentions on the *Spitzenkandidaten* (again, we merge the two categories). Following Lowe et al. (2011), we measure the framing of the issues as $\log(\text{total pos} + 0.5) - \log(\text{total neg} + 0.5)$, with high values indicating a positive tone and low values indicating a negative tone.

**Independent variables:** For measuring our independent variables, we use several sources. To measure if the party supported a candidate (H2), we rely on the EP party group he or she joined after the 2014 EP election. Here, we differentiate between parties that belong to a group which supported a candidate and parties that are part of the two EP groups which did not nominate a candidate or were part of it before the

\(^7\) Two different coding categories with their respective positive and negative occurrences were available: “040801 *Spitzenkandidaten general*” (positive: favorable mentions of their general role in the EU; negative: negative mentions of their general role in the EU); “040802 *Spitzenkandidaten specific*” (positive: favorable mentions of a specific *Spitzenkandidaten* [i.e., Jean-Claude Juncker, Martin Schulz, Guy Verhofstadt, Ska Keller, José Bové and Alexis Tsipras]; negative: negative mentions of a specific *Spitzenkandidaten* [i.e., Jean-Claude Juncker, Martin Schulz, Guy Verhofstadt, Ska Keller, José Bové and Alexis Tsipras])).
elections. The position of parties towards the EU (H3) is measured by using the “EU_position” variable from the 2016 Chapel Hill Expert Study (Bakker et al., 2015), while the position of the party supporters (H4) is based on the data from the 2014 EES Voter’s Study. Moreover, we measure governing status (H5) by using the Parlgov data set (Döring & Manow, 2015). Last but not least, in order to capture home country effects (H6), we add a dummy variable that takes the value “1” when parties are based in the same country as one of the Spitzenkandidaten. We further control for the size of the party, if the document is a proper electoral manifesto or another type of document (i.e., 'official' election-related document, manifesto of party leader, extract from the national manifesto, or any other party document), and the size of the party manifesto.

6. Analysis

We start with an overview of the parties that include the Spitzenkandidaten topic in their manifestos (see Appendix 1). Rather surprisingly, only 37 out of the 199 parties in our data make reference to the Spitzenkandidaten topic; furthermore, the parties that mention the topic devote less than 1% of the space of their manifesto to it. Taking into account all manifestos we can note that parties devote on average around 0.12% of the manifesto’s space to the Spitzenkandidaten topic. This is less than what parties dedicate to other “new” topics that are less significant for the future of the EU, e.g. the

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8 This number was computed by summing up the proportion of quasi-sentences mentioning the topic across all parties and dividing it by the total number of manifestos (i.e., parties) in our data.
Ukraine conflict, which is covered by 39 parties and is assigned around 0.17% of the space across all manifestos. Moreover, the *Spitzenkandidaten* topic is insignificant compared to one of the most salient topics in the manifestos, i.e., social justice, which is mentioned by 170 parties and is assigned around 4.1% of the space across all manifestos. In fact, the *Spitzenkandidaten* issue is among one of the least mentioned in the Euromanifestos and only comparable to issues such as “Socialist property”, “Nationalization” or “Voting procedures in the Council”. Hence, we conclude that the data fails to support H1; on the contrary, most parties chose to ignore the topic, and those who didn’t devote very little space to it. However, we find empirical evidence for the second part of our hypothesis: The overall tone is consistently positive, with only two exceptions—the Danish “Konservative Folkepartit” and the Greek “Kommounistiko Komma Ellados”. Moreover, this first descriptive overview in Table 1 brings partial support for H2: it seems that parties belonging to EP groups which nominated a *Spitzenkandidaten* are more likely to mention the topic, as only one party from the two EP groups that did nominate a candidate brought forward the topic. As expected, the countries in which the *Spitzenkandidaten* topic is more salient (i.e., H6) are France, Greece and Austria but slightly also the Czech Republic, a country where Euroscepticism has been on the rise in recent years. Also surprising is the fact that the topic is comparatively less salient in the countries which nominated the potential future president of the EP, i.e., in Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg. However, all in all it should not be forgotten that the salience of the topic is very low across all countries.
In the next step of our analysis, we provide a more rigorous quantitative analysis of the factors that determine both the salience and the framing of the topic. Before presenting the results in Table 1, we need to make a few observations. First, we chose to use a simple categorical variable in order to measure the attention the party dedicates to the *Spitzenkandidaten* topic\(^9\), given that even the parties that mention the topic devote very little space to it. Second, as we do not consider that not mentioning the issue is reflective of the *Spitzenkandidaten* topic, when analyzing how parties frame the topic we only include the parties that mention the candidates. Third, as EP group membership and the position of parties on EU integration are highly correlated, we decided to include them in separate models. Last but not least, while all results presented in Table 1 are based on multilevel models, we need to point out that Models 1 to 4 (i.e., the ones predicting the mentions of the *Spitzenkandidaten* topic) are generalized linear multilevel models which use a logistic link function, while Models 5 to 7 (i.e., the ones predicting the framing of the *Spitzenkandidaten* topic) are simple linear multilevel models.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fixed effects</th>
<th>Model 1 (salience)</th>
<th>Model 2 (salience)</th>
<th>Model 3 (salience)</th>
<th>Model 4 (salience)</th>
<th>Model 5 (framing)</th>
<th>Model 6 (framing)</th>
<th>Model 7 (framing)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-4.985***</td>
<td>-2.854***</td>
<td>-5.054***</td>
<td>-3.553**</td>
<td>0.189</td>
<td>0.080</td>
<td>-0.564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.248)</td>
<td>(1.056)</td>
<td>(1.378)</td>
<td>(1.463)</td>
<td>(0.503)</td>
<td>(0.463)</td>
<td>(0.638)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EP group of</td>
<td>2.201**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.617</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Spitzenkandidaten</em></td>
<td>(0.861)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.392)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EP group without</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-2.051**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^9\) The results are very similar when performing a sensitive check for which we use the untransformed variable and employ tobit regression models pulled across all countries.
The results presented in Table 2 bring at least partial support to four of our hypotheses. Accordingly, Model 1 supports H2.1, as parties belonging to an EP group that nominated a candidate are on average 9 times more likely to mention the Spitzenkandidaten topic. Furthermore, this variable also has a positive and statistically significant impact on the propensity of parties to frame the topic in a positive way (see Model 5).
hence supporting H2.2. On the other hand, we do not find any evidence that parties belonging to the EPP group are less likely to make references to the topic, given the internal divisions that marked the nomination procedure of the group (see Model 2).

We also find evidence to support H3.1, as Model 3 shows that an anti-pro EU orientation of a party has a positive and statically significant effect on its propensity to mention the *Spitzenkandidaten* topic. What can further be observed is that moving from an extreme anti-EU position to an extreme pro-EU position increases the probability for a party to mention the topic by approximately 20 percentage points (see Figure 1). This result is robust across operationalization, since using the untransformed measure of salience yields the same substantive results\textsuperscript{11}. As expected, we also find support for H3.2, since parties adopting more pro-EU stances are also more likely to use a positive tone when mentioning the topic. We can contrast the effect of the party position on the anti-pro EU axis with the position of party supporters on the same axis. As a reminder, it might as well be the case that the position supporters dictate what parties choose to emphasize in their manifestos. When testing this hypothesis, it is further important to mention that, due to the high correlation between the party position and the supporters’ position, including them both in the same model would lead to multicollinearity. This being said, we can note that the EU stance of party supporters has a positive and statically significant impact only on how parties frame the topic but

\textsuperscript{11} In subsequent models we also controlled for how salient the EU issue is for the party and the degree of intra-party dissent regarding this issue (both measured by the 2015 CHES data). None of these effects reached statistical significance, and adding them to the model did not impact the substantive effect of the other variables.
not on the salience\textsuperscript{12}. Last but not least, we also find a strong “home country” effect, as parties from the countries of the candidates are on average almost six times more likely to make reference to the \textit{Spitzenkandidaten} topic in their manifestos, which is also in line with previous findings.

\textbf{Figure 1: Predicted probability to mention the \textit{Spitzenkandidaten} topic depending on anti-pro EU position of parties.}

Altogether, our findings show that the emphasis of the topic under investigation is determined by three main factors. First, the home country: if the candidate stems from the country in which the party runs for the EP election, the \textit{Spitzenkandidaten} system

\textsuperscript{12} Including both the party position and the position of supporters in the same model does not change the substantive findings for the salience models, but it renders effects statically insignificant in the case of the framing model. Furthermore, it is important to note that the results are similar when computing the position of supporters based either on the 2009 EES Voter Study or the 2012 European Social Survey.
is much more salient among parties. Second, if the party belongs to an EP party group supporting one of the candidates, the *Spitzenkandidaten* system is more likely to be salient for the party. Third, the party’s general position towards the EU is influential: pro-EU parties are more likely to both mention the *Spitzenkandidaten* topic and frame it in a more positive light than others. Moreover, if supporters of a party are more pro-EU, the party is also more likely to frame the topic in a positive light. However, we did not find that the position of supporters also has an impact on salience.

7. Conclusion

The key institutional changes introduced in line with the Lisbon Treaty (2009) are assumed to have an impact on both voters’ political behavior and electoral campaigns of political parties in the 2014 EP elections. Accordingly, we asked whether the prospect of providing the president of the European Commission affected parties’ behavior in their electoral campaigns and whether the political parties were among the main promoters of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system.

The findings of our empirical analyses show that this was clearly not the case. The majority of the parties running for the 2014 EP elections did not put much emphasis on the candidates themselves or on the *Spitzenkandidaten* system—and the few parties who did mention it dedicated only very little space of their manifestos to the topic. Obviously, disregarding the obvious theoretical benefits, parties saw little strategic
reason why emphasizing the *Spitzenkandidaten* topic should be advantageous for their cause. The factor of strategic consideration also explains why pro-European parties were more likely to mention the topic in their EMs. According to the theory of issue ownership (Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik et al., 2003), parties tend to emphasize the issues that advocate their strengths. Therefore, parties with clear pro-European stances are more likely to mention the *Spitzenkandidaten* topic in their EMs since they considered that the benefits of this institutional change (i.e., a reduction of the EU’s democratic deficit) could play in favor of their pro-EU rhetoric. Strategic consideration also justifies the higher salience of the topic among the EP party groups that nominated a candidate and the home country effects. Parties decided to put the topic on their agenda if their European party group nominated a candidate that had at least a theoretical chance to become the next president of the EU commission or if they expected electoral gains by criticizing/praising the *Spitzenkandidaten* from their own country. The fact that strategic considerations play a major role for the explanation of the salience of the topic in question, clearly illustrates that although for the first time and thanks to the new institutional setting a pan-European contest has been created, the main actors in this contest, i.e. the national political parties, did not tap the full potential in this regard. This may be due to the lack of a transnational party system that obviously cannot be only achieved by means of national political parties, but rather by taking into account the Europarties (see also Gagatek, 2016).
Nonetheless, critical readers might interpret our findings in a different way: On the one hand, one can argue that part of the reason why parties fail to mention the *Spitzenkandidaten* topic more often in their manifesto is that the EP groups announce their nominations after the parties have drafted the Euromanifestos. Nevertheless, this interpretation can be refuted since the idea of a new institutional setting including the idea of the *Spitzenkandidaten* system has been debated already years before, and in particular the EPP was one of the most important promoters of the system (Christiansen 2016). Consequently, all parties could have covered the topic in their manifestos by pointing to the institutional innovation as such and not necessarily mentioning the candidate (in case that the nomination happened too late). On the other hand, one might argue that the *Spitzenkandidaten* topic was indeed salient for parties, as we hypothesized in the theoretical part of the paper, but that they rather used different channels, such as social media, instead of emphasizing the topic in their election manifestos. This would be a valid plea. While manifestos are intermediaries between the party, the candidates, and the public, and are thus responsible for the indirect communication between parties and voters, social media is rather in charge for the

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13 In practice, only the EPP announced the nomination of Juncker rather late, in early March 2014 (Put et al., 2016), while the other EP groups announced their candidate at least four months before the elections. In the case of PES, it was clear that Martin Schulz was the candidate since early November 2013, ALDE agreed that Guy Verhofstadt would be the only candidate in January 2014, the European Greens also announced in January 2014 their decision to nominate the Ska Keller-José Bové duo while the European left nominated Alex Tsipras (the only candidate) as their candidate in December 2013. In addition to that we can note that parties devote a similar level of attention to both specific mentions and the general mention of the system (the 37 parties who mentioned the *Spitzenkandidaten* topic devote on average 0.36% of the total space of their manifestos to specific mentions of candidates and 0.27% to general mentions of the issue). Furthermore, the same factors drive parties to mention both the specific candidates and the topic in general. Hence, we strongly consider that the time of nomination cannot explain the low salience of the topic among parties competing in the European Parliament elections.
communication between candidates and the public. Nevertheless, in our opinion, social media communication of parties and candidates is not likely to diverge from the official party communication via manifestos to such an extent that the *Spitzenkandidaten* topic would appear to be salient. But, of course contrasting the two channels might represent a very fruitful endeavor for further investigations. To be more precise, future research might analyze the salience of the topic over both manifestos and social media and also instigate how successful the two channels are in raising awareness about this new political development among the general public.

**References**


