

Unless Juncker and Schulz can co-operate, the EU will lose an important opportunity for democratisation

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*Candidates have been put forward for the next President of the European Commission in advance of the European elections on 22-25 May. One of the key unanswered questions over this process, however, is whether national governments will agree to propose one of these candidates rather than exercising their right to pick an alternative. **Pier Domenico Tortola** writes that given the likely makeup of the Parliament, it is unlikely any candidate will hold a majority without the two main parliamentary groups – those of the European People’s Party and the Party of European Socialists – forming a ‘grand coalition’. Whether or not these two groups can agree to co-operate will have important consequences on the future institutional setup of the Union.*



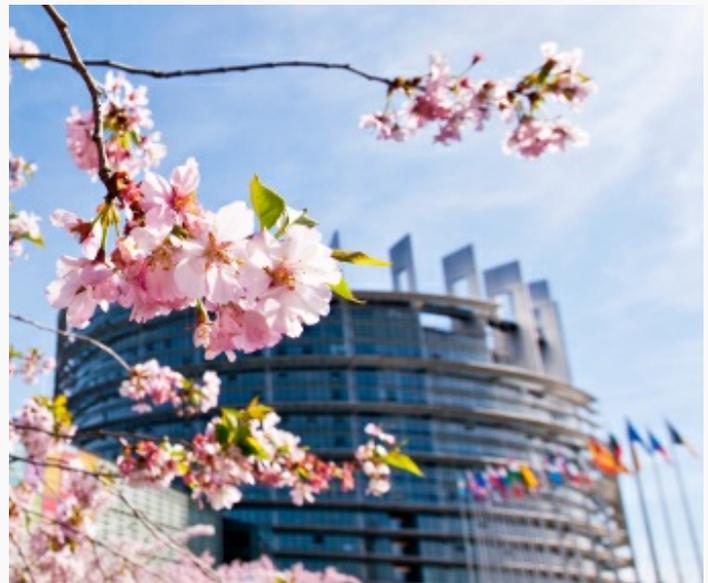
Political scientists use the term “critical juncture” to indicate those moments in history that establish legacies, usually in the form of institutions, for the years to come. Critical junctures often coincide with times of crisis, when existing political and institutional structures are challenged and a ‘window of fluidity’ is open, in which political choices, events and struggles eventually crystallise a new order.

The European Union is undergoing one of these junctures. The Eurozone crisis opened a phase of political turmoil in which European institutions are being pulled in different directions by forces competing to redefine the nature and working of the Union. An important chapter in this process of contestation will come in a couple of months’ time, when the new President of the European Commission – the EU’s executive body – will be appointed.

The Lisbon Treaty, which currently regulates the matter, gives the directly elected European Parliament (EP) the power to elect José Manuel Barroso’s successor upon proposal by the European Council, a gathering of the EU member states’ heads of government. The Council’s proposal in turn will have to “take into account” the result of the EP elections, which will be held across the Union on May 22-25.

This setup lends itself to different interpretations. The EP would like the new Commission President’s name to come directly from the polls as a way to democratise the Union and counter the mounting challenge of populist and Eurosceptic parties. To this end, the main European parties have nominated presidential candidates to lead their campaigns. The frontrunners are EP President Martin Schulz for the Party of European Socialists (PES) and former Luxembourg Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker for the centre-right European People’s Party (EPP). The remaining candidates are Belgium’s Guy Verhofstadt for the Liberals, Greece’s Alexis Tsipras for the radical left and the Franco-German ticket between José Bové and Ska Keller for the Greens.

Member states, on the other hand, for the most part prefer a minimalist and conservative reading of the treaty’s wording, which would preserve the Council’s leading role in selecting the Commission head. States’ positions will be



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untenable if one of the parties obtains a clear majority, for in that case refusing to put forward the winning candidate would amount to a slap in the face to European voters – hardly a clever move these days. However, such a clear victory will probably not materialise.

Grand coalition: Italian or German style?

According to the [latest opinion polls](#), the upcoming European elections will most likely produce a fragmented parliament, in which the Socialists and the EPP will each control little more than a quarter of the seats. Combined with the predicted success of Eurosceptic parties, this means that a PES-EPP grand coalition will eventually have to be formed to elect the next Commission president.

Faced with a hung parliament, the Council might try to go for someone other than the running candidates, whom the EP might be tempted to accept as a convenient compromise in a situation in which nobody has won. This ‘Italian style’ grand coalition – one in which none of the party leaders takes the top executive job, as exemplified most recently by the government led by Enrico Letta, which ended last February – is [often indicated](#) as the likeliest outcome of the May elections. So much so that names of possible ‘dark horses’ are already circulating, including International Monetary Fund director Christine Lagarde and Danish prime minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt, among others.

Regardless of who would eventually get the job, the Italian scenario would mark a victory for the Council and the intergovernmental mode of governance. Through their power of proposal, states would retain the upper hand in picking the new Commission head, and considerable control over him/her after they have been appointed. More importantly, severing the link between EP elections and the Commission presidency would be a huge blow to the notion of electoral democracy in the Union, one that would certainly not help the cause of EU supporters vis-à-vis Euroscepticism.

There is, however, another route to a grand coalition. The parliament of Germany, another EU member state, has twice adopted this formula in recent years (2005-09 and 2013-present), electing in both instances the leader of the relative majority party – Angela Merkel – as federal chancellor. Transposed to the EU case, this logic entails that a PES-EPP coalition should still support whomever between Schulz and Juncker comes first, no matter how small his party’s margin of victory is.

A Commission president elected this way would not have the strongest of mandates, but could still count on an unprecedented degree of democratic legitimation, with all that follows in terms of political capital and autonomy from the member states. Above all, electing one of the running candidates would establish without a doubt the principle that the EP, not the Council, decides who the president is, and that it is therefore the voters who have the last word on the matter. This will help enormously to make the Commission more like a traditional government, raise the profile of future EP elections and reduce the Union’s democratic deficit.

The bigger picture

The key requirement for the German scenario to take place is that the runner-up candidate will need to take a unilateral step back after the election and persuade his party to support his former competitor. This will be no small feat, given that the Council might try to exploit national cleavages within EP party groups – would a French socialist, for instance, choose Juncker over Lagarde? – and that any compensation to sweeten the runner-up’s pill (such as giving him another top EU job) depends crucially on the states’ cooperation, which might not come in a situation of institutional confrontation.

And yet both Schulz and Juncker should be willing to take such risks. In an ordinary polity and in normal times, the significance of their choices would be merely political. In the context of today’s European Union whatever they will do will probably have institutional consequences stretching well beyond the next five years. In a way, one could say that the two men are making history – or at least a small piece of it – and have the privilege of knowing that. Both claim

to be for a closer and more democratic Union. Soon they will have a chance to practice what they preach.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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