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*Was the European Parliament election 2014 second-order and how significant is the Spitzenkandidaten Procedure?*

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**1. List of abbreviations**  
European Parliament – EP

Figure – Fig.

## 2. Introduction

According to a German proverb "election day is payday". It implies two things: First, elections are settled, so they are decisive; and second: elections have value. For individuals, for society, for democracy. After reading this proverb the low participation in the last election to the European Parliament in 2014 seems all the more astonishing. Only 42.54 percent of eligible Europeans cast their votes, 14 percent less than in 1994. Voter turnout at European level has been decreasing since the first direct election in 1979 (Gómez a. Wessels 2016, p.5). Thus, several political scientists have theorized that European elections should be classified *second-order* in comparison with elections to the national parliament (Reif a. Schmitt 1980, p.8). This classification and the measures are to be examined under the question "*Was the European Parliament election 2014 second-order and how significant is the Spitzenkandidaten Procedure*" and will be analyzed in more detail in this paper. First of all, the *second-order election* approach will be presented according to the classic method of Reif and Schmitt (1980) in its six dimensions and then transferred to the results of the EP election 2014 on the basis of four selected dimensions. In the following, the novel model of the so-called *Spitzenkandidaten Procedure* for the European elections will be presented and its effectiveness will be measured against the 2014 results. As the analysis of the EP is working mainly with data from the political scientist Hendrik Träger, a paper by Johannes Müller Gómez and Wolfgang Wessels is mandatory for the introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten Procedure*. English and German literature is used here to the same extent.

Finally, a classification of the EP election 2014 as a *second-order election* should be made and the effectiveness of the *Spitzenkandidaten Procedure* evaluated. In addition, an outlook on fields of further scientific research will be delivered.

### 3. The second-order election approach

The second-order election approach dates back to the first direct election of the EP in 1979 (Reif a. Schmitt 1980, p.3) and has since become an integral part of political debates and discussions (Gómez a. Wessels 2016, p.5). The approach was developed a year later, in 1980, by Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt. Even today, the concept is widely used by other researchers<sup>1</sup>, developed further and applied to analyse European Parliament elections which is why it is also intended to serve as a theoretical basis for this essay (Kaeding a. Switek 2014, p.33).

In their article named *Nine Second-Order National Elections – A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results* (1980) Schmitt and Reif differentiate between *first order elections*, such as the election of the parliament or the president on national level, and the *second-order elections*, which include European and regional elections (Reif a. Schmitt 1980, p.8). In order to make the categorization clearer, the authors have developed six different dimensions for differentiation of first and second-order elections:

The first of the six levels of differentiation, the *less at stake dimension (1)*, assumes that a second-order election seems to be less important than a first-order election (Reif a. Schmitt 1980, p.9). According to the authors, this first criterion is, as it were, the most important one: "Perhaps the most important aspect of second-order elections is that there is less at stake" (Reif a. Schmitt 1980, p.9). The *specific-arena dimension (2)* introduces the level of comparison into the European election analysis. It looks at the actors to be observed and their outcomes in various elections. Thus, the comparison following the example of Dinkel<sup>2</sup> is important in order to validly interpret possible variances in the results. The central aspect of the *institutional-procedural dimension (3)* is that the differences between the first and second-order election are examined, for example in the electoral system, which may be advantageous for smaller parties like in France (Reif a. Schmitt 1980, p.13). The *campaign dimension (4)* is aimed at the election campaigns of the parties. This is more important in second-order elections than in first-order elections (Reif a. Schmitt 1980, p.13). Meanwhile, the *main-arena political change dimension (5)* focuses on the differences between the two voting plans. For example, the preferences of a specific group of voters such as the working class (Reif a. Schmitt 1980, p.15). The last di-

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<sup>1</sup> The second-order approach has been taken up, modified and rethought since 1979 both by the authors themselves (Reif 1984; Schmitt 2005) and by other political scientists (such as Marsh 1998; Hix a. Marsh 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Dinkel compared the results of state and parliamentary elections in his analysis (Dinkel 1977).

mension relevant in the theory of Reif and Schmitt is the *social and cultural change dimension (6)* which focuses on the social changes between election years and attempts to generate analytical added value (Reif a. Schmitt 1980, p.15).

Second-order elections seem to be clearly subordinate to the national first-order elections for both parties and citizens so that according to Reif and Schmitt significant differences in voting behaviour can be observed (Reif a. Schmitt 1980, p.18). For example, the turnout for second-order elections is much lower (Reif a. Schmitt 1980, p.10), there are more voters who void their ballots because of dissatisfaction, there are often losses for the governing parties and the smaller younger parties have significantly better chances of gaining more votes (Reif a. Schmitt 1980, p.9).

In summary, it can be observed that in the six analysis dimensions according to Reif and Schmitt (1980) significant differences in the form of first and second-order elections can be observed. Subsequently, the second-order election approach will be applied to the results of the European Parliament election 2014. Following the criteria of Reif and Schmitt, it will be analysed as to whether it could be classified as a second-order election.

### **3.1 European Parliament election 2014 – a second-order election?**

In order to answer the question of whether the European Parliament election 2014 is a second-order election, this work is largely based on the study of political scientist Hendrik Träger who conducted this same analysis for all 28 countries in the context of the European Parliament election 2014. The main reason for following this study to answer the research question is that Träger also relies on the understanding of the theory of Reif and Schmitt (1980) presented in Chapter 3: *the second-order election approach*. In terms of the validity of the research process, this ensures the greatest possible consistency in the understanding of theory. For the analysis of the European Parliament election 2014, Träger uses the factors of *voter participation (it is considered to be the most important category and, therefore, it will be the most detailed factor in the analysis)*, the *invalidity of votes*, the *importance of national governing parties* and the *influence of younger, emerging parties*<sup>3</sup> as categories in his investigation (Träger in Kaeding a. Switek 2014, p.35).

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<sup>3</sup> There is no common definition in research as to what a small party is (Kranepohl a. Niedermayer 2013, p.664). In this essay, small parties are those that achieved less than five percent of the total votes in the past national election.

*Voter Participation:*

With regard to turnout the concept of Reif and Schmitt can be clearly confirmed. In all 28 countries surveyed, the turnout for 2014 was significantly lower in the European elections than in the election to national parliaments. However, the differences between the individual countries were considerable (Träger in Kaeding a. Switek 2014, p.35). While in Belgium and Greece the difference is marginal, Slovakia, posted a voter turnout of only 13 percent in the past European elections (Kaeding a. Switek 2014, p.33). The election difference in Slovakia is nine times higher than in Greece and Belgium (Träger in Kaeding a. Switek 2014, p.35). Taking the limited scope of this paper into consideration the differences between European and national differences may well be illustrated graphically:

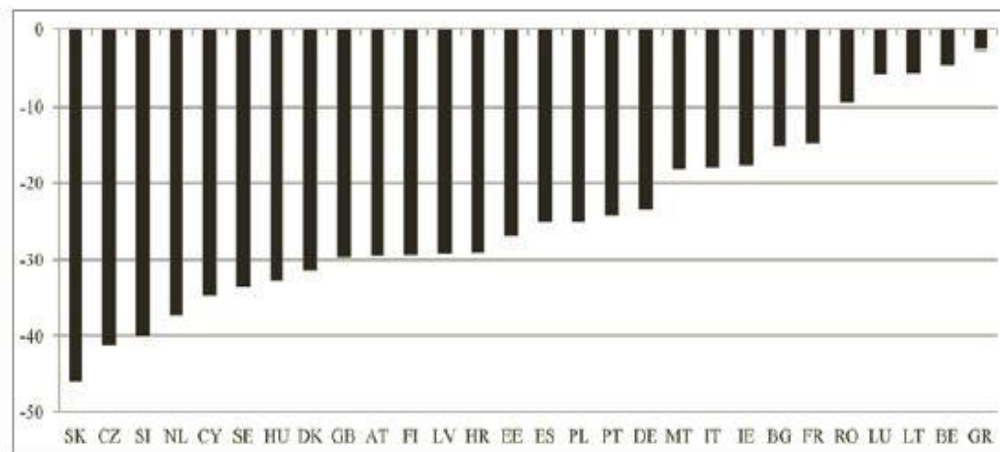


Fig.1: Differences in voter turnout of each country (in percentage points); taken from Träger in Kaeding a. Switek 2014, p.36.

When looking at the graph and its interpretation there is a clear *bias* between East and West European countries (Kaeding a. Switek 2014, p.36). It is also striking that only in seven countries the majority of the population voted in the European elections. The question of the indifference of the citizens towards the European Union and the European construct must at least be raised in this context (Träger in Kaeding a. Switek 2014, p.36). The turnout in Germany (48.1 percent) is 4.83 percent higher than in 2009, but compared to participation in Belgium (89.64 percent), Luxembourg (85.55 percent) or Malta (74.80 percent) it is rather disappointing and mediocre (Kaeding a. Switek 2014, pp.25). However, if these three top countries, along with others like Denmark (56.3 percent) (Kaeding a. Switek 2014, pp.25), are used as prime examples, it must be taken into account that – at least formally – in Belgium, Luxembourg and Malta there is an obligation to vote (Kaeding a. Switek 2014, p.36).

All in all, the model thesis of Reif and Schmitt in terms of voter turnout has to be followed (Reif a. Schmitt 1980, p.10). Apart from the significant east-west divide and negative outliers such as Slovakia it is alarming that also the overall participation in the election has been steadily declining. In 2014, the total figure decreased to 42.54 percent. By comparison, twenty years earlier 56.67 percent of all eligible Europeans had voted (Kaeding a. Switek 2014, p.25).

*Invalidity of votes:*

In terms of invalidity of votes, the tendency is less clear than assumed by Reif and Schmitt who underline a significantly higher invalidity of votes (Reif a. Schmitt 1980, p.9). In the European Parliament elections 2014, at most, a moderate increase in void ballots can be stated (Träger in Kaeding a. Switek 2014, p.37). Only in 14 out of 24 countries for which comparative data was available in the study<sup>4</sup> more invalid votes were cast in the European elections in 2014 than in the elections to the national parliament. There were even fewer invalid votes in seven of the countries examined, while three countries, including Germany, did not experienced any change (Träger in Kaeding a. Switek 2014, p.37). However, the differences between countries were significant, as shown in the following graphic:

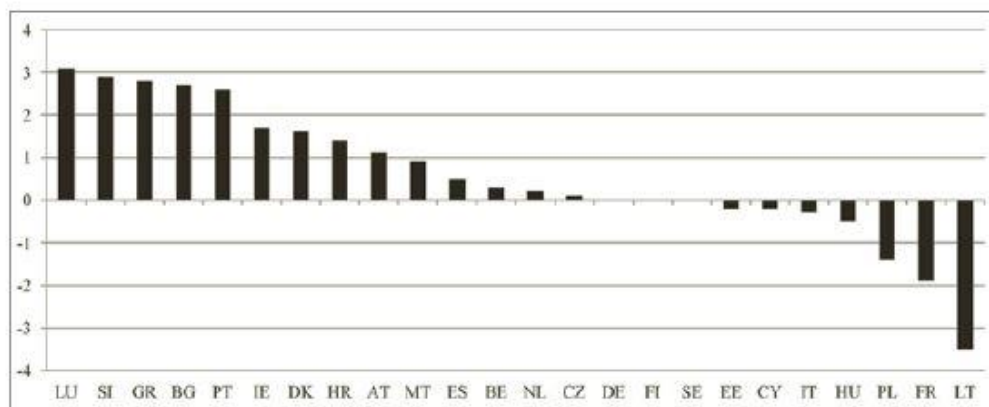


Fig. 2: Differences in invalid votes (in percentage points); taken from Träger in Kaeding a. Switek 2014, p.37.

*Importance of national governing parties:*

In direct relation to the second-order election approach, which assumes a majority loss of national governing parties, it can be mentioned that the governing parties suffered losses in 20 out of 28 EU countries surveyed. These were partly marginal (0.4 percentage points in Cyprus), sometimes exorbitant (30.6 percentage points in Slo-

<sup>4</sup> For the United Kingdom, Latvia, Sweden and Slovakia no measured data were available. Therefore, they cannot be taken into account in the analysis of the invalid votes.



venia) (Träger in Kaeding a. Switek 2014, p.39). Gains are recorded only in a few countries so that the thesis of Reif and Schmitt can be confirmed with regard to the voting losses of national governing parties.

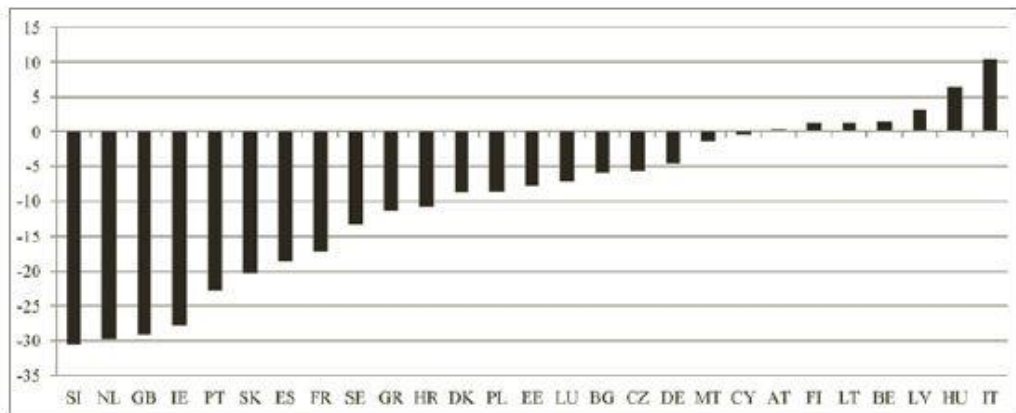


Fig. 3: Differences in the election results of national governing parties; taken from Träger in Kaeding a. Switek 2014, p.39.

*Influence of younger, emerging parties:*

Once more, the second-order election approach following to Reif a. Schmitt can be confirmed. In 25 of the 28 EU countries surveyed, the younger and smaller parties were able to increase their voting shares; often even significantly (Träger in Kaeding a. Switek 2014, p.42). Frequently, for example in Germany, Great Britain and France, splinter parties with a strong national character set the tone. Also the aspiring *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany is assigned to the right spectrum by national party researchers (Franzmann 2014, p.115).

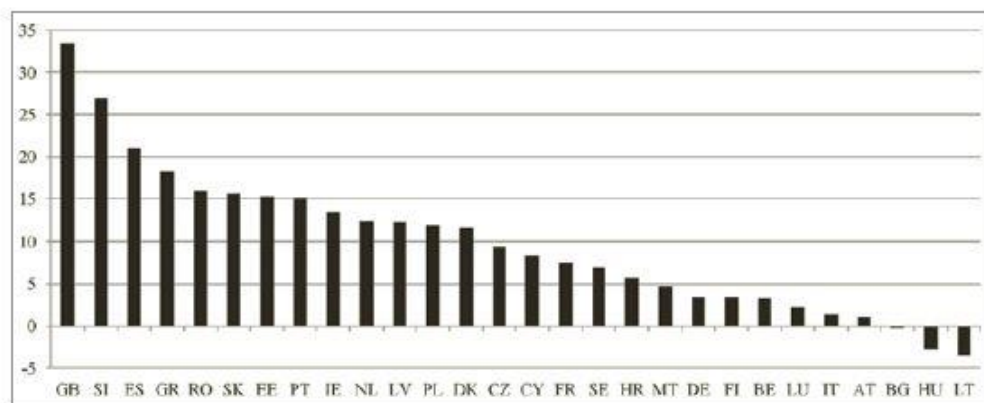


Fig. 4: Resulting differences among younger, emerging parties; taken from Träger in Kaeding a. Switek 2014, p.40.

## *Conclusion*

Following the approach of Reif and Schmitt, the 2014 European Parliament election can be classified as a second-order election. The examined factors have made it clear to a bigger (*voter participation, invalidity of votes, importance of national governing parties and influence of younger, emerging parties*) or lesser extent (*invalidity of votes*) that the 2014 European Parliament election is to be scientifically characterized as secondary-order. In each state the participation rate in national parliamentary elections was higher than in the European elections, in 20 of the 28 countries surveyed national governing parties suffered losses and in 25 countries young, smaller splinter parties were able to skip the five percent hurdle. According to Reif and Schmitt, all of these are criteria defining a secondary-order election (Träger in Kaeding a. Switek 2014, p.42).

### **4. Personalization for a better turnout: The idea of the Spitzenkandidaten Procedure**

The introduction of the Spitzenkandidaten Procedure in 2014 was a major innovation for the EP elections and the elections of the President of the European Commission (Gómez a. Wessels 2016, p.1). Letting the European political parties nominate Spitzenkandidaten is intended to make the elections more personal (Schmitt et al. 2015, p. 352) and to also motivate Eurosceptics and non-voters to cast their ballots (Schmitt et al. 2015, p. 357). The following chapter comprises the essential basics of the Spitzenkandidaten Procedure, a discussion on its advantages and disadvantages as well as a review of the newly introduced method's effectiveness during the European Parliament election 2014.

#### **4.1 The principle of the Spitzenkandidaten Procedure**

The Spitzenkandidaten Procedure was introduced in 2014 by the legislative body of the European Union, the European Parliament (EP). It was meant to strengthen the role of EP elections in competition with national elections and to increase participation in the EP elections. Another goal was to motivate those entitled to vote to participate more actively in the democratic voting process (Gómez a. Wessels 2016, p.1).

Another consideration for this new *modus operandi* was an attempt to focus the election campaign more on supranational issues, thus minimizing the importance of national electoral issues for the outcome of the elections. However, this was insufficient, because the past election campaign turned out to be still strongly influenced by national and anti-european tendencies (Gómez a. Wessels 2016, p.1). The far more

important intention was to strengthen the EP vis-à-vis the national heads of government, especially in the important election of the Commission's President (Gómez a. Wessels 2016, p.5). This is particularly to be seen in the light of the growing powers of the EP (Gahler a. Schlomach in Dialer a. Neisser 2010, p.330).

The legal framework needed for this reform was set out in the *Lisbon Treaty*, ratified in 2007 and entered into force in 2009 (Gómez a. Wessels 2016, p.2). The first efforts to introduce this process are already found in the *Treaty of Amsterdam from the year 2002*. Exemplarily here in article 214 (European Union 1997, p.130).

In principle, the highly controversial model of the Spitzenkandidaten Procedure in parliament represents a choice of persons, as is often the case at the level of the EU member states. The parliamentary parties or the political groups determine in an internally conducted process the member with whom they compete for the election of the EP (Rohrschneider et al. 2015, p.5). Before the reform in the process of the European elections, the parties appeared only with their respective electoral candidates in the voters' consciousness (Rohrschneider et al. 2015, p.7).

#### **4.2 Advantages and disadvantages of the Spitzenkandidaten Procedure**

The identification of potential voters with the respective Spitzenkandidat can be cited as a positive feature of this newly introduced procedure. A Spitzenkandidat can support the voter with clear political positions and statements in political opinion formation (Rohrschneider et al. 2015, p.2).

Another positive effect of the reform is the candidate's presence in online media such as *Twitter* and the classic models of media. Worth mentioning here is the first TV debate between two European Spitzenkandidaten. Many voters already know these formats from national votes. They are considered to be very effective instruments for shaping political opinions (Schmitt et al. 2015, p. 351). However, the negative aspects of the introduced Spitzenkandidaten process are also noteworthy.

In this regard, the actually positive effect of personal identifiability with the Spitzenkandidat has the grave disadvantage that personal defamation against the candidate has a significant influence on voters. An example is the discussion about the EPP's Spitzenkandidat Juncker, who was accused of tax concessions (Krupa 2015, *die Zeit*)<sup>5</sup>. Another negative effect of the Spitzenkandidaten Procedure is the polarization of the parties in parliament, both in the course of the reform and after the

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<sup>5</sup> Here a leading German newspaper was cited, since in monographs or journal articles there was nothing to be found on the above-mentioned topic. This could also be due to the timeliness of the event.

election in 2014. A parliamentary model that is so controversial can hardly be used as an instrument to form a legislative branch (Gómez a. Wessels 2016, p.3).

#### **4.3 Influence of the Spitzenkandidaten Procedure on the EP election 2014**

The above-mentioned considerations on the introduction of the Spitzenkandidaten Procedure still need to be classified in terms of their effectiveness in the EP election 2014. Looking at the turnout, it has to be said that the top-of-the-range model failed to achieve its hoped-for effect. At 42.54 percent, the voter turnout was marginally lower than in 2009 (43 percent), while considerably more Eurosceptic or anti-European parties managed to gain a seat in parliament (Schmitt et al. 2015, p. 352). Also regarding the voters' identification with the European parties or the Spitzenkandidat, there is no positive conclusion to be drawn. Those voters who described themselves as more pro-European, and who were thus not the target of the reform, knew the Spitzenkandidaten, and presumably their political positions and visions. The number of voters to be addressed – hence, in particular, non-voters and eurosceptics – was unknown to the Spitzenkandidaten Procedure and the underlying principle (Schmitt et al. 2015, p. 357).

*In conclusio*, it should be noted that hardly any measurable effects of the newly introduced leading candidate process on the European Parliament election 2014 were observed.

## **5. Conclusion and outlook**

This paper has analysed the European Parliament election 2014 to determine whether it – according to the second-order approach of Reif and Schmitt – should be classified as a second-order election. The study of all 28 EU states shows that the European elections in 2014 confirm the thesis of Schmitt and Reif, and are to be classified as secondary elections in comparison to the national parliament elections. This is reflected in the participation of all EU states. In all countries, participation in the ballot was more pronounced at national level than at European level (Träger in Kaeding a. Switek 2014, p.41). The same applies to the number of votes cast, the losses of national governing parties and the national rise of young small parties. Following the model of Reif and Schmitt, the European Parliament election 2014, taking into account all these dimensions, can be attributed to a second-order election.

Likewise, the effectiveness of the newly introduced Spitzenkandidaten procedure was examined in this paper. Here it became clear that the Spitzenkandidaten Procedure combines clear advantages and disadvantages which could not bring the desired effect in the result, since participation in the EP elections from 2009 (43 percent) to 2014 (42.54 percent) again – if only marginally – worsened.

These results lay an interesting foundation for future research. On the one hand, it remains to be seen whether and, if so, to what extent the EP election 2019 can also be classified as a second-order election. Furthermore, the final validity of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure remains an interesting field for future research, as a positive impact of personalization on turnout could already be demonstrated in earlier research (Schmitt et al. 2015, p.347). That the implication of this personalization may take time is one of the questions that future research in this area is likely to raise.

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## **7. List of figures**

Figure1: Differences in voter turnout within each country (in percentage points), taken from Träger in Kaeding a. Switek 2014, p.36.

Figure 2: Differences in invalid votes (in percentage points), taken from Träger in Kaeding a. Switek 2014, p.37.

Figure 3: Differences in the election results of national governing parties, taken from Träger in Kaeding a. Switek 2014, p.39.

Figure 4: Resulting differences among younger, emerging parties, taken from Träger in Kaeding a. Switek 2014, p.40.

### **8. Statutory declaration**

Herewith I, Florian Gontek, declare that I have authored this thesis independently, that I have not used other than the declared sources / resources, and that I have explicitly marked all material which has been quoted either literally or by content from the used sources.

Istanbul, 2 January 2018

