



CEPS POLICY BRIEF

HOW TO MAKE THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS MORE EUROPEAN

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SUMMARY

As we rapidly approach the 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections, once again we are witnessing the discrepancy between the increased importance that the EP plays in EU citizens' lives and the transnational character of most of today's issues on the one hand, and the national character that the EP elections still have on the other.

This CEPS Policy Brief describes the elections' low visibility (mainly due to a largely unharmonised electoral framework) and their perceived low stakes (mainly due to lacking a link between the elections to the legislature and the head of the EU's executive arm, the Commission). It recommends addressing these challenges in two phases – in the immediate aftermath of the elections, the EU institutions should honour the election results and avoid institutional turf battles. In the next institutional cycle, Member States should prioritise harmonising EU electoral law, with a particular focus on combining the introduction of transnational lists with more visibility for European political parties and a revised lead candidate procedure.



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EU ELECTIONS: INVISIBLY IMPACTFUL

From 6 to 9 June, EU citizens will be casting their votes in one of the largest democratic elections in the world. Once this is over, the EU will be embarking on a new institutional cycle, with a new European Parliament (EP), the election of a new Commission and the European Council of national leaders setting the EU's next Strategic Agenda.

The decisions taken within the EU institutions have never been as impactful on citizens' lives and as politically contested as they are today. In the 2019-24 institutional cycle, the EU adopted a wide array of measures as part of the European Green Deal, tightening climate policy goals and regulations, many of which are also heavily controversial, such as the ban on combustion engine cars or new restrictions on farmers.

Migration policy continues to be a heated topic across the EU as the EU institutions adopted the far-reaching [Common European Asylum System](#) (CEAS) package. No less important, the EU played a crucial role in purchasing vaccines and supporting the economic recovery out of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as adopting sanctions against Russia and providing military and financial aid to Ukraine.

Yet the EP elections remain a decisively national affair, essentially 27 separate national elections, with little to no pan-European political debate. The electoral choices on ballot lists remain the national parties, with most of them not even referring to the European political party that they belong to throughout their campaigns. Much of the political advertising and materials only highlight national politicians, including some who are not even running for the EP elections (such as the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz). Some parties have also put candidates on their lists who do not plan to enter the EP even if they are elected (such as Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni).

The 'lead candidate' system, which was by-passed by the European Council in 2019 to nominate Ursula von der Leyen as Commission President, is largely moribund. Even if von der Leyen is running as the EPP's lead candidate this time, she is [not even being heavily featured](#) in her own national party's campaign. The other 'lead candidates' are barely known outside the EU bubble nor do they lead much of a pan-European campaign, with the exception of [Nicolas Schmit](#), the Social Democrats' Luxembourgish lead candidate. Instead, they are mostly focussing on their home countries, as this is where they will physically appear on the ballots.

These lacklustre national campaigns stand in stark contrast to voters' interests, as turnout went up for the first time in the 2019 EP elections and [Eurobarometer](#) polling indicates that citizens are once again actually interested in the 2024 elections.

This diagnosis of the European elections' lack of democratic force is definitely not new and has long been part of the discussion over the EU's overall democratic deficit. But the heightened political importance of EU decisions leads to higher expectations regarding legitimacy and accountability, thus demanding more from the EP elections and other ways where EU citizens can be actively involved at EU level.

To explore options to remedy this, in 2023 CEPS and [SWP](#) put together a 'High-Level Group on Bolstering EU Democracy', which produced the report '[The Radicality of Sunlight](#)' with five key recommendations on how to make the EU more democratic, most importantly by increasing transparency, accountability and citizens' involvement. The 2024 EP elections are one specific area where improvements are not only desired but are becoming increasingly more necessary with each passing electoral cycle.

DIAGNOSIS: EP ELECTIONS SUFFER FROM LOW VISIBILITY AND LOW STAKES

LOW VISIBILITY

The electoral campaigns thus far have once again reconfirmed it – the EP elections are still *de facto* [27 different national elections](#) taking place alongside each other, where MEPs are elected from national lists. EU electoral law sets some general rules (most importantly that each voting system must ensure proportional representation) but fails to harmonise essential elements (such as the size and number of constituencies, voting age, the electoral threshold, the day of voting, rules for non-resident voters and campaign financing).

Consequently, national systems differ greatly. For example, the electoral threshold differs from Member State to Member State by 0 to 5 %. In some Member States, the lists are open (i.e. allowing citizens to choose between different candidates from the same party), while in others the lists are closed (i.e. a pre-ordered list of candidates presented by the parties). In a few countries, such as Austria, Germany and Belgium, 16- and 17-year-olds can vote and across Member States candidates' minimum age can range from 18 to 25. Some citizens can vote from abroad by visiting their respective consulate and some citizens can vote via post or proxy vote. One Member State (Estonia) even allows for online voting – whereas in others like Ireland or the Czech Republic it's not possible at all to vote from abroad.

Such bespoke arrangements may be desirable by allowing European politics to fit specific national contexts and circumstances but they ultimately lead to low visibility for the European political parties that are not even featured on national ballot papers. Instead, they are filled with national candidates selected by national parties. Even during the EP's parliamentary term, **there is very little visibility of MEPs and their work** – even if citizens

want to know more, the EP's own website does not provide an easy overview of how MEPs and their political groups have voted on large legislative files that citizens find interesting. This situation is not helped by the fact that national media outlets either overlook or ignore the EP's work on these large files, thus reinforcing the dominant national focus of the elections.

There have been efforts, mostly by the EP itself, to make EP elections more visible and to strengthen their European dimension. The [Direct Elections Act](#) has been in force since the EP's first elections in 1979 and has been revised twice, in 2002 and in 2018. The EP [proposed ambitious electoral reforms](#) in 2015 but they were stripped down to the bare bones by the Council and are still not in force today.

The EP [tried again in 2022](#) and its proposal was discussed in the Council during the outgoing institutional cycle. The Swedish Council Presidency surveyed Member States on the EP's proposal, a process which [revealed](#), unsurprisingly, that the *'biggest difficulties concerned the proposals regarding the lead candidate process and an EU-wide constituency based on transnational lists'*. The first reservation is due to a fear of over-constraining the Member States. The second is due to the difficulty of respecting the relative weight of the Member States and the specific concerns of smaller Member States.

Not only do Member State governments show a great deal of reluctance to adopt a common electoral framework but national parties are often a part of the challenge as well. European political parties and the corresponding political groups in the EP are an assembly of many national parties, rather than genuine transnational parties. National voters are often completely unaware of this as national parties don't sufficiently explain this transnational dimension.

In short, parties aim to gain as many seats and as much influence as possible. As (face) recognition translates to electoral support, parties tend to campaign with people, issues and logos that their voters are already familiar with. Thus, national parties have little incentive to relate to the distant and broadly unknown sphere of EU politics.

On top of this, the EP election campaigns are launched by the national political parties only a few weeks before the elections. This gives voters very little time to familiarise themselves with the process and the candidates, meaning that national political elites generally do little in practice to contribute to a pan-European democratic space. During the [2024 EP election campaign](#), once again, only a very few national parties have even referred to their European political parties, instead preferring to campaign in their safe and secure national political spaces.

LOWER STAKES

But beyond visibility and the lower level of interest from voters, lower turnout than in most national elections (50.66 % in 2019) is surely also due to a perception that there are fewer things at stake in EP elections. In contrast to national elections, EP elections do not directly determine a government's composition (or, in the EU's case, the Commission). At stake in EP elections is who sits in the EP, not who will govern and determine the EU's overall course or policy agenda. Citizens don't choose between rival candidates for executive offices. Until 2014 and the launch of the so-called *Spitzenkandidaten* – or lead candidate – process, there was no obvious connection between what happens in the EP elections and the Commission's eventual composition.

Subsequently, citizens often vote in EP elections less strategically ('with their head') or according to their ideological preferences ('with their heart'), but rather as a form of protest ('with their boot'). Since voters do not generally perceive their votes as having to decide between rival policy programmes, the EP electoral contest fails to significantly incentivise political parties to develop competing policy ideas that would encourage political debate and lead to genuine attempts to influence public opinion. In short, **the less that's at stake, the less likely that people are motivated to show up** and if they do show up, they're more likely to vote against their current government as a clear sign of unhappiness with its performance.

Thus, **EP elections largely fail to provide what is core to democracy – accountability for political actions**. Despite large and important legislative packages being adopted, such as the Green Deal, the Common Asylum System reform and the Digital Single Markets Act, voters can be forgiven for wondering who is ultimately accountable among such a complex and distant cast of characters and institutions.

There are multiple executive actors (the European Council, the Commission, EU agencies and the comitology system), as well as numerous governments, that are held to account by parliaments at different governance levels (the EP and national parliaments) and by bodies such as the Court of Auditors, and the Ombudsman, plus the European Court of Justice. **Nevertheless, there is enough evidence to argue that the quality of EU accountability has improved over the past few years** primarily through empowering the EP and national parliaments, as well as establishing the European Ombudsman and upgrading the European Court of Auditors.

The Commission has been made much more accountable over the last two decades through political reform, treaty change and administrative reform, and – above all – by tying it much more closely to the EP. The EP now has significant democratic control over the Commission. It elects the President of the Commission following a proposal by the European Council. The EP screens candidate Commissioners and formally approves the

full College of Commissioners. In the past, the EP has regularly rejected one or two candidates for the College as being unsuitable.

The EP can also hold the Commission to account by posing (oral and written) [parliamentary questions](#), and Commissioners regularly appear before EP plenary sessions and committees. Ultimately, the EP even has the power to hold a no-confidence vote in the Commission, thereby forcing it to collectively step down – but only if a two-thirds majority threshold is reached.

This increasingly strong institutional bond between the EP and the Commission moves the latter closer to party politics and partisan considerations. The Commission's politicisation is sometimes portrayed as problematic, with the argument that its independence and neutrality as guardian of the treaties and the general European interest have been eroded, thereby, negatively impacting the EU's overall credibility. But on the other hand, **the Commission's increased dependence on the EP makes it more democratically accountable, a necessary step towards the EU's overall further democratisation.**

But despite growing accountability structures around the Commission, there remains an electoral accountability deficit. **In a democratic polity, citizens must be able to hold decision-makers to account.** The lack of any real contest over executive power in the EP elections lowers both public interest and turnout, and therefore overall electoral accountability.

To address this issue (and presumably to increase their power), the main European political parties took a bold move in creatively interpreting the Treaty of Lisbon's ambiguity by introducing electoral logic that is similar to what is customary in parliamentary democracies, namely elections determining not only the parliament's composition but also the government (at least its head) and its policy programme.

This morphed into the lead candidate procedure, where the European political parties announce their candidates for the Commission President ahead of the election, making it clear that they expect their candidate to become Commission President if they 'win' the elections, i.e. if they become the largest party in the next EP. The aim, by making executive power the prize, is to raise the stakes for EP elections, increase voter turnout and endow the Commission – as the EU's key executive body – with greater electoral accountability.

Following the procedure's debut in 2014, but also the subsequent failure in 2019 to secure the Commission presidency for any EP lead candidate, European political parties have nominated candidates again in 2024. However, the system has become increasingly

[frayed](#), as different kinds of lead candidates emerge, thus creating much confusion around the concept and what it means in practice.

It's crucial that the EP is involved in making this selection process more transparent. However, to establish solid electoral accountability, a fully-fledged lead candidate system would need to be established, based on the guarantee that one of the lead candidates would become Commission President (either from the party family which wins the most seats or the one that is able to build a majority coalition).

However, at the EU level, such automaticity is not possible – the EU is a Union of citizens *and* states. The EU treaties gave the prerogative to appoint the Commission President to both the EP *and* the European Council. That means that **there cannot be such a fully-fledged lead candidate system without major institutional reform.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

As the EP elections are – at the time of writing – only just over a week away, recommendations on how to make EU elections more democratic and European should focus on two phases – what should and can still be done in the aftermath of the 2024 elections, and what should be done over the next institutional cycle, looking further ahead to 2029 and beyond.

PHASE ONE – WHAT CAN BE DONE IN 2024?

1.) Honour the election result and avoid turf battles

The most obvious signal to EU citizens that the European elections matter is to **fully honour the election result.**

This almost basic tenet is not as basic as it seems on first sight. Politically, the EU's heads of state and government are already preparing the next EU Strategic Agenda, and have already laid down four key priority areas for the next institutional cycle in their 2023 [Granada declaration](#). In their two June 2024 summits, they are likely to endorse a strategic agenda that has largely already been written. But EU political priorities should be fed from its two strands of legitimacy – the national governments in the Council and the Parliament.

To honour this, **the EP's political groups should be given time to negotiate a political programme that can be the basis for a stable majority for the next legislative term.** This is likely to happen in the form of intense conversations between the political groups and the Commission President-designate on their agenda for the next term. After the European Council has appointed the President-designate, the EP political groups would

sit with that person and discuss their political priorities. With the following vote on confirming the President in the EP's plenary (and the possible looming threat of non-approval), **this is the EP's moment of maximum leverage and the most influence it can wield over the Commission's agenda.**

Given that already in 2019 von der Leyen was confirmed only by a paper-thin margin and given that current polling [suggests](#) an even more fragmented EP, this is especially important, for the next Commission President's appointment, the approval of their agenda and for passing legislation in the upcoming term.

Following on from this, the EU Treaties, which state that the European Council 'has to take [the EP election results] into account', leaves too much room for interpretation, as the experiences in 2014 and especially 2019 have shown. Both elections were followed by a turf battle between the EP and the European Council over who gets to decide the executive's top job. This could be less of an issue in 2024, as Ursula von der Leyen might be the candidate that is acceptable to both institutions, especially if the EPP remains the largest political group in the EP.

But a new inter-institutional battle is equally likely, either because von der Leyen fails to muster a majority in the EP or the European Council nominates a different candidate, someone who was not one of the political parties' 'lead candidates'. Institutional turf battles are damaging for the EU's reputation, especially when they follow an electoral promise that cannot be kept.

After the elections, **the two institutions involved (the European Council and the EP) should therefore work together rather than against each other.** For the European Council, this would mean potentially consulting with the leaders of the political groups in the EP *before* nominating a candidate, to gauge who can realistically build a majority, rather than pressing ahead in its June meeting and trying to present the EP with a *fait accompli*.

For the EP, this would equally mean accepting the European Council's prerogative to nominate a candidate, including the very real fact that there is no automaticity that the lead candidate from the EP's largest group will be the one nominated. As on the national level, such a process might require time for negotiations to take place to reach an individual with a programme who can be both nominated in the European Council and win a majority vote in the EP.

PHASE TWO — PLANNING AHEAD FOR FUTURE EP ELECTIONS

As the next institutional cycles gets going, the EU institutions should also learn the lessons from the 2024 elections and think ahead. Because, on the one hand, previous experiences and legal requirements teach us that reforming EU electoral law and the electoral process

needs time to be implemented and thus would need to be decided well before the 2029 elections. On the other hand, the upcoming institutional cycle will also include a window of opportunity for (modest) institutional reform, due to the expected dynamic enlargement to the east and the ensuing [discussion](#) on how to reform the EU institutions (and EU policies).

2.) Governments and oppositions alike across the Member States should pledge to make European political parties and the EP elections more visible to voters

National parties would do well to familiarise voters with how they are embedded within the European political parties and EP political groups. They should commit to highlighting their affiliation with the European political parties (and to the corresponding parties' lead candidate during the electoral campaign) on all electoral and campaign materials, such as ballot papers, leaflets and billboards.

National parties should also voluntarily implement another idea brought [forward by the EP](#), which is to publish the political programmes and display the relevant logos in the top section of their websites' homepages, making sure that these are clearly visible.

Revising EU electoral law and processing the EP's proposal for this should be a priority in the next legislative cycle. Member States also controversially discuss many of the EP's proposed measures. Nonetheless, in preparation for 2029, **Member States should harmonise how the EP elections take place**, to facilitate a truly transnational electoral space.

3.) The introduction of transnational lists with a revised lead candidate process

Although the proposal for transnational lists has thus far not garnered support from Member States, even a small number of transnationally elected MEPs could transform the visibility of the European political parties. Such lists would include **candidates elected through a single constituency that covers the EU's entire territory**. This would mean that citizens could vote for candidates across Member States and **give them two votes** – one for their national or regional constituency, and the other for the entire EU. Each party family would decide upon a certain number of candidates and thereby create their respective transnational lists, making European political parties directly electable for the first time.

Such transnational lists **would also transform the lead candidate procedure, as the respective candidates would be quite literally leading a list and be on the EU-wide half of the ballot**. This would also increase incentives to campaign with the candidates and it would increase the Commission's overall legitimacy. Institutionalising the lead candidate process would still be a viable solution but seeing how reluctant the European political parties are about appointing attractive candidates (i.e. those that actually stand a chance

of being chosen by the European Council) and how hesitant those candidates are to properly campaign across the EU, this is not a recommendation to make at this time.

Such institutional modifications are no panacea to turn the EP elections into a ‘first order’ election event in the same vein as national elections. It would still be challenging for candidates to increase their profiles across the entire EU. But the first hurdle would be to convince national governments from smaller Member States (who strongly oppose transnational lists) and to counter their argument (and fears) that such an innovation would favour larger Member States and would motivate candidates to only campaign in the countries where they can win the most votes.

To help achieve this, transnational lists **should be designed in a way to guarantee representation from across the EU**. Though how much harm a small list (of 27, as suggested by the EP) could possibly cause is debatable as these seats would be taken from the UK’s vacated seats, thus ensuring no seats would be taken away from any current Member State.

OUTLOOK: TOWARDS A CONTESTED EUROPEAN SUMMER?

The European elections are a crucial moment for legitimising EU policies but their potential remains only partially tapped. As the paradox of non-European EU elections perseveres, the elections themselves have become invisibly impactful – the EP co-decides the future direction of European economic, climate and migration policies, and has the task of building a durable majority to elect the next Commission President. The next College will be the most politically challenging in the history of the EU – and yet political campaigns continue to be largely national affairs and are still treated by the media and political parties as second-rate elections.

Looking ahead, as the EU institutions work to put in place the top leadership for the next institutional cycle, they should have a strong interest in **strengthening the legitimacy that stems from the elections and make further progress on transforming 27 separate elections into a truly joint transnational European election**.

In the short term, **this means avoiding inter-institutional turf battles over the Commission’s leadership** while organising a stable majority for a new political programme that reflects the election result. In the long run, the EU **should use the upcoming institutional cycle and the potential institutional revisions that are planned for EU enlargement to also address crucial questions of democratic legitimacy**. This includes increasing the visibility of European political parties and creating a durable link between transnational lists, lead candidates and who ultimately ends up leading the EU.



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