

Jostling for position: What determines where candidates are placed on electoral lists during European elections?

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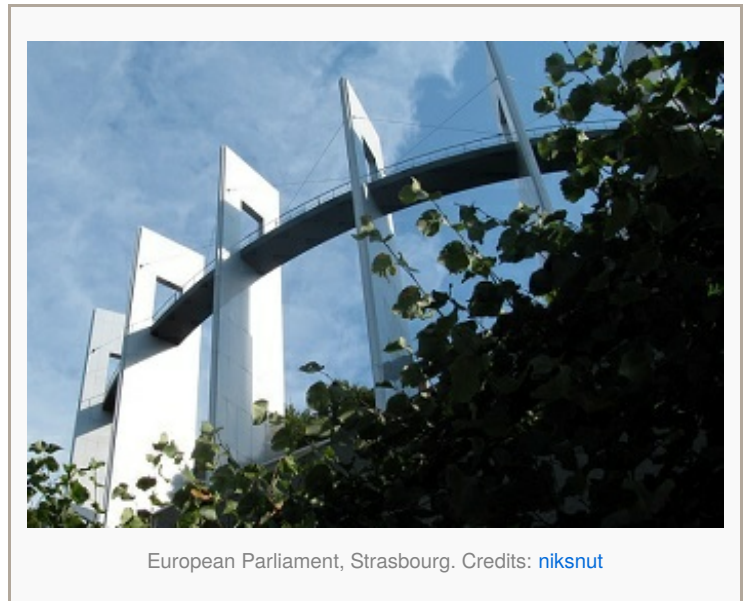
Several EU countries use a closed list system to elect their members of the European Parliament. But what determines the position where a candidate is placed on these lists? Based on a recent study, [Elena Frech](#) writes that parties tend to prioritise MEPs who have previously been part of powerful committees in the European Parliament, but that candidates also need to maintain close links with the party organisation to receive a favourable position on the list.



Many citizens all over Europe view the European Union as undemocratic, lacking in transparency, and distant from voters. Indeed, [two out of three](#) Europeans think that their voice does not count in the European Union. Many reasons for this so called 'democratic deficit' have been identified; however, developing an understanding of the most direct democratic link between voters and the EU – European Parliament elections – is undoubtedly one of the key steps in reaching a solution.

Over 60 per cent of European citizens cannot vote for a specific candidate in European elections. Instead, voters in countries with closed list proportional representation electoral systems are only allowed to choose a national party. By deciding the list placement of candidates, national parties in closed list systems effectively determine who is elected. If a national party places a specific candidate in a very low list position, the candidate has no chance of being elected.

In contrast, as proportional representation candidates are elected starting from the first candidate on the list and continuing downward, the first list position of larger parties is usually very safe. Given that voters have a very limited influence on who is elected in closed list electoral systems, it is unsurprising that in these systems about 5 per cent more citizens, on average, believe that their voice does not count in the European Union. Voters in countries that allow for specific candidates to be chosen are (on average) more likely to feel that their vote in European elections counts.



Explaining German candidate selection in European elections

National parties therefore have enormous selection power in European elections in several countries. However, we know relatively little about how they select their candidates and why. In a recent [study](#), I use Germany as an example to analyse which factors determine the list placement of incumbent parliamentarians standing for re-election.

I propose national parties pursue three different goals when selecting candidates. First, they want legislative leverage: the power or potential to influence policies. Second, national parties value loyalty. Third, parties want to maximise votes by selecting popular candidates who can increase the number of their party members in the Parliament.

My results show that German parties tend to place European parliamentarians who have been members of more powerful EP committees – for example the committee dealing with economic and monetary affairs – on better, more promising list positions than candidates who have been only part of a less powerful committee – for instance the committee on women’s rights and gender equality. Surprisingly, my study yields no convincing effect of factors related to the other two goals – loyalty and attractiveness to voters – on the list placement of incumbent European parliamentarians.

This is not to say that German national parties find these goals unimportant. Measurement problems or a European Parliament that is simply too distant from Germany for parties to observe how loyal their MEPs really are could explain these results (please see the [accompanying paper](#) for further discussion on this topic).

Contact with the national party counts

Maintaining contact with a national party also counts a great deal for candidate selection. The experience of Friedrich-Wilhelm Graefe zu Baringdorf illustrates this point. He had represented the German Green party in the European Parliament for 25 years when the party decided not to re-select him for the 2009 European elections. Some party delegates [explained](#) their decision by stating that he had ‘lifted off’, no longer showed his face in the party’s sub-district organisation, and had taken to campaigning exclusively for a farmers’ lobbying group that he was the President of.

German members of the EP are well advised to stay in close contact with their local party leadership if they want to be re-elected. Analyses of party statutes and interviews with German party leaderships have shown why this is the case: partially due to the federal structure of Germany, candidate selection of national parties is relatively de-centralised.

German parties either construct 16 different electoral lists for European elections, one in each state (this is the case in the CDU/CSU), or have one federal electoral list. In both systems, candidates are usually selected at the local or sub-district level and need to win recognition at the district and state level. Due to this distinct pre-selection process, local and regional party leaderships are relatively powerful in proposing and selecting candidates for the European elections.

Being a member of a national party executive (while serving as an MEP) provides an important means of staying in contact with party members who make selection decisions. National party offices also help to influence (informal) pre-selection. Nearly one in two of the German MEPs elected between 1999 and 2009 had an advantage in getting re-elected because they were part of a party’s leadership (in the local, sub-district, district, state, or federal party organisation) during their mandate.

Informal pre-selection and excessive informal bargaining before a party conference may lead to a situation where it is clear who will run on which list position. Analyses show that German incumbent parliamentarians get lower list positions when running for re-election to the EP if the intensity of competition for promising list positions is high at a party conference (this means that informal bargaining beforehand was probably less pronounced). A possible explanation for this phenomenon is the incumbents’ advantage in informal pre-selection processes.

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Note: For more information, see the [author’s](#) recent publication in [European Union Politics](#), which is based on a dissertation pursued at the University of Mannheim. This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPPE – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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