

**POLICY BRIEF**  
***Transforming Representative Democracy in the EU?***  
***The role of the European Parliament***  
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Parliaments are not structured to be leaders and the European Parliament is no exception. Its bureaucracy is relatively small, its budget devoted to administrative, not operating expenditure. It acts to control the various executive bodies of the European Union, without claiming to want to take their place, and its legislative role, though substantially enhanced over the last 30 years, continues to be shared with the Council of the EU and is heavily conditioned by bargaining between the main political groups, with no single group enjoying a dominant role. In short, it is not the kind of institution that is normally seen as a “leader”.

This contribution differs: it argues that the Parliament has played and continues to play a pivotal leadership role in the struggle over the character of representative democracy at EU level. For much of its history the EP argued for a system based on competition between institutions operating on the principle of a *separation of powers*. It sought to establish an identity separate from that of the executive bodies of the EU, including the Commission, which enabled it to aspire to parity with the Council. This process culminated in the Lisbon Treaty changes.

However, the events of 2014 and thereafter have reflected a different paradigm. We have witnessed the emergence of an embryonic form of *parliamentary government* where executive power is channelled through the elected representatives of the people. The so-called *Spitzenkandidaten* experiment reflected an important change in the way the governance of the EU is conceived. The Parliament made plain its determination to accept as Commission President only someone who had been a candidate in advance of the elections and it succeeded. The result was the development of a very close relationship between Parliament and Commission, where it has become almost impossible to distinguish their priorities.

The precise consequences of the change remain uncertain and raise a range of policy questions, including:

- Will the experience of the Juncker Commission persuade the Parliament to maintain its position that it will only accept as Commission President in 2019 someone who has been a candidate before the European elections?
- Will the European Council be willing once again to accept this claim of the Parliament?
- Will national parties be willing to agree to the logic of the Spitzenkandidaten process and support a party candidate they may not have supported?
- Will populist anti-EU parties want to become involved in the process and put forward their own candidates for Commission President in 2019?

These questions reflect the impact of 2014 on the paradigm of parliamentary democracy at EU level. The question at stake is whether the EU is ready to legitimate the idea of the Commission and Parliament constituting an embryonic form of parliamentary government, each deriving their authority from a single electoral contest. Those who claim it is impossible at European level to choose between different policy options and to throw out an executive that is seen to have failed are now obliged to justify their position. One can now imagine a Commission that is not beyond democratic electoral reach and a European Parliament that can offer the possibility of policy change through executive renewal, a system where ‘rascals can be thrown out’. This transformation of the debate about representative government has been brought about by the Parliament in its role as a leader in challenging the principles of EU governance, a leader in the development of ideas. A longer version is forthcoming in *Journal of European Integration* Vol. 39(2), Feb.2017