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# DISCUSSION PAPER

## After Schulz: the election of the new president of the European Parliament

*Andrew Duff*

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Brussels is no stranger to political confusion, especially when the leadership of the EU institutions is concerned. Already the press wheels out its usual reports of backroom deals and an imminent 'stitch-up' between party bosses for the election of the next president of the European Parliament, which takes place next Tuesday (17 January) in Strasbourg. The truth is much more democratic and therefore complicated. So, by way of a public good, here's my contribution to the debate: first, I will deal with the Parliament's rules for the election; then I will talk about what may motivate MEPs to vote for whom; lastly, I will ask whether this election matters very much at all.

### The rules

In the first three rounds of the election, somebody is elected by obtaining an absolute majority of the valid votes cast – in other words, the winning candidate needs more than the combined votes of all the other candidates. At the equivalent moment five years ago, for example, Martin Schulz was elected on the first ballot with 387 votes (including mine) against two other candidates whose combined total was 283. 29 votes were invalid and 52 MEPs did not vote at all. So abstentions and spoiled ballots do matter, although not as much as a real vote. MEPs will cast a secret ballot, as the rules prescribe, which limits the power of their political groups and parties to influence their choice. Only the names of all those who voted are later published.

This time there are many more candidates and much less consensus than in 2012, so it is very unlikely that anyone will emerge victorious from the first three rounds of voting. Although candidates may drop out at any stage of the process – and the most marginal probably will – there is nothing in the rules to insist that they do. Nor is there anything to prevent new candidates being nominated before the second or third rounds. To secure a nomination a candidate needs the support of a political group or at least 40 MEPs.

In the fourth and final round of voting, however, only the top two candidates go forward and secure election by a simple majority of valid votes cast (not, please note, by an absolute majority of the House).

### The candidates

So far there are eight candidates declared, as follows:

The conservative group of the European People's Party has nominated **Antonio Tajani** (63). He is the best dressed of the candidates, but comes from the stable of Silvio Berlusconi which is not an obvious advantage;

he also carries a mixed reputation as a former Commissioner. He won an internal contest within the EPP group against the veteran French notable Alain Lamassoure, former Slovenian Prime Minister Alojz Peterlee and the respected Irish Vice-President of the Parliament Mairead McGuinness. Although the EPP group can be commended for holding a proper primary election, not all the EPP's 217 MEPs will vote for Tajani.

**Gianni Pittella** (58) is the candidate of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D). He sports classy spectacles and is well-liked, although in his current role as S&D group leader he has not always cut a commanding figure. Pittella comes from the party of Matteo Renzi, an acquired taste. Pittella had no rival for the socialist nomination, and most of the 189 S&D MEPs will back him.

The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) has nominated its leader **Guy Verhofstadt** (63), arguably the best parliamentarian in the House and a former long-standing prime minister of Belgium. He led for the Liberals in the 2014 election and is the Parliament's chief negotiator on Brexit. He is a controversial figure, not least for his advanced federalist views, but his only rival for the nomination within the ALDE group was Sylvie Goulard, also a federalist *fidèle*. ALDE has 68 MEPs.

Verhofstadt's emergence in the first round is a bit of a surprise: he might have been wiser to wait until the third before stepping in as a compromise candidate to break a deadlock once the relative unpopularity of Tajani and Pittella had been exposed. We will see.

The communist European United Left – Nordic Green Left (GUE), with 52 MEPs, have nominated yet another Italian, **Eleonora Forenza**. Pittella needs badly to pick up her supporters.

**Jean Lambert** is the candidate of the Greens/European Free Alliance, with 50 fairly lively members. She is well-respected and as the only Brit in the race, something of a curiosity. Verhofstadt will be plugging hard for Green votes in later rounds.

The eurosceptic group of European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), which was founded by the now disgraced David Cameron, has put forward a lesser-known Belgian, **Helga Stevens**. The group has 74 MEPs, several of whom might switch to support Tajani.

Nigel Farage's motley group, the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD), has nominated a young Neopolitan called **Piernicola Pedicini**, a follower of Beppe Grillo. He can expect few votes even from his own group, nominally 44 strong.

The Europe of Nations and Freedom (EFN) group of Marine Le Pen (39 MEPs) has presented its candidate. He is **Laurentiu Rebeaga**, a Romanian.

## The campaign

Every two and a half years, the election contest for the presidency of the House provokes debate about where the institution is headed, both externally and internally. Martin Schulz, uniquely having served two terms of office, has certainly enlarged the profile of the European Parliament. He has not led a very convincing reformist movement, however, and the Parliament has entirely failed to capitalise on the *Spitzenkandidat* experiment of 2014, which propelled Jean-Claude Juncker into the presidency of the Commission, Schulz himself into the Parliament's top seat and Verhofstadt to greater prominence. There has been no serious push, for example, towards the introduction of a pan-European constituency for the 2019 elections in which a number of MEPs would be elected from transnational lists. The Parliament has not emerged as a leading strategic player in response to the major crises which have afflicted and still afflict the Union. The Parliament has concentrated on putting in place the first laws of banking union, but the legislative agenda in general has slowed. Enlargement is off the table and constitutional reform has stalled.

Of the three who have any realistic chance of winning the prize, Verhofstadt has the most progressive and coherent agenda to re-launch Europe. He argues that he is the man "with a proven ability to lead a broad coalition and who can unite the pro-European forces in this house". He would be the first Liberal president since Pat Cox in 2002 and the first Belgian since 1965.

Tajani or Pittella would be the first Italian president of the House since Emilio Colombo in 1977. Antonio Tajani is a pro-European of relentlessly conservative inclinations, fearing to make Europe's political crisis worse by antagonising eurosceptical public opinion.

Gianni Pittella hopes to pick up support by attacking the politics of austerity. Moreover, he is trying furiously to distance himself from the cosy coalition between the S&D and the EPP which has supposedly been running the Parliament for the last few years, mirroring the *Grosse Koalition* in Berlin. For good or ill, this pact has prospered under the aegis of Schulz and EPP leader Manfred Weber, Juncker's Chef de Cabinet Martin Selmayr and Parliament's Secretary-General, Klaus Welle. Pittella's problem is that Verhofstadt is the much more credible slayer of this German-led Christian Democrat/Social Democrat fudge, not having been implicated in it himself (sometimes, it must be owned, to his own evident frustration).

What will shift the votes of MEPs? Nationality does not really matter in this context – at least for the vast majority of MEPs who easily fit into Europe's classic partisan spectrum. Indeed, it would be counter-intuitive to favour a candidate who was a fellow-countryman but from a rival political camp. And with four Italian candidates, being Italian will help none of them. A sense of 'fair turns' would scupper the chances of another German from winning the crown (even among Germans MEPs). In certain circumstances, MEPs could be influenced by regional instinct to vote across party boundaries – for example, by supporting a fellow Scandinavian or Central European – but the absence of either breed from the contest this time is striking.

Similarly, gender could and should be a factor, but with the three women candidates destined to come low in the political ranking, it cannot be so this time. There is no black or ethnic minority candidate.

So the predominant influence will be that of party affiliation, in spite of the fact that group cohesion, especially in the EPP and ALDE is unreliable. In a House whose *raison d'être* is the European project, degrees of support for further European integration is a significant factor. Strong nationalists will never vote for strong federalists, and vice versa. But as no nationalist candidate can win, it is the mildly 'pro-European' Tajani, in contradistinction to Pittella or Verhofstadt, who can pick up eurosceptic votes in later rounds. Tajani's dilemma is that to secure victory he knows he cannot rely only on right-wing MEPs, and must not lose the backing of pro-European Christian Democrats; but the more centrist Tajani purports to be, the more he will shed the support of eurosceptics.

And it is Verhofstadt, not Tajani who can hope to recruit the unconventional votes of the 17 Grillini as and when Pedicini leaves the stage. At the time of writing the Five Star Movement is considering jumping ship from the EFDD to ALDE, in a move that would signal their introduction to mainstream European politics.

In any case, expect a substantial abstention in the later ballots from the forces of the traditional far-right, most of which loathe the EPP.

As to policies, it will be the candidate who can best articulate a new economic policy that could turn votes, especially among serious-minded Germans, Dutch and Scandinavian MEPs from the European People's Party who are critical of Italy's economic record and are drawn to admire Verhofstadt's stringent attacks on the economic performance of the Commission and European Council. The presumed and variable personal probity of the candidates also matters to these Nordic types.

There will be much manoeuvring this week to find the candidate from the centre-left who can beat Tajani in the fourth ballot. Wise pundits expect the list of candidates to either lengthen or shorten before voting starts next Tuesday.

On the face of it, as things stand, Antonio Tajani is the favourite. If elected, all three EU institutions would be then led by the EPP. There is much to be said against such a monopoly on top posts. Tajani's election would surely weaken the case for the automatic re-appointment of Donald Tusk to the presidency of the European Council in May – a re-appointment which is in any case hotly and rudely opposed by the Polish government (whose Law & Justice MEPs belong to the ECR parliamentary group).

If Guy Verhofstadt wins this contest the logic of the 2014 experiment with *Spitzenkandidaten* will be maintained, and he would be in a strong position to lead the Liberal campaign at the 2019 elections to the European Parliament – just as President Martin Schulz did as the top candidate for the socialists in 2014. Nobody should doubt that Verhofstadt's real ambition is to succeed Jean-Claude Juncker as Commission president. Chairing the Parliament judiciously for a couple of years would be the best possible way to dispel his reputation in Council circles as a firebrand. Moreover, by June 2019 Brexit will have removed the habitual British veto of any Belgian federalist who vies for the top Commission job.

## Does it matter?

Whatever happens in the race for Parliament's presidency, there will then be a shuffling of the pack in other parliamentary posts, including the appointment of a new Brexit front-person if Verhofstadt is elevated. But it's the top job that really matters, and who gets it is a decision that belongs uniquely to MEPs. Attempts by national capitals to influence the outcome may back-fire. The European Council and the Commission will simply have to adjust as best they can to their new parliamentary interlocutor.

On the wider plane, the result will be watched closely to see whether the centre-left can reorganise itself more sensibly at the European level than it seems able to do nationally. Such a feat could have important implications for 2019.

Another weak president of the European Parliament could do a lot of harm to the efficiency and authority of the House. Another strong president, by building on the legacy of Schulz, should exploit the trauma of Brexit to enhance the legitimacy of parliamentary democracy at the federal level. Preparations will begin under the watch of the new president to make the next big steps forward in European integration. MEPs can start to build a new consensus around the EU's reform agenda. They will have a direct say in the long overdue review of the EU's financial system. Parliament should reinforce its efforts to shape the EU's international trade policy. Its internal procedures must become more open and meritocratic. Both the Juncker Commission and the Tusk European Council deserve sharper parliamentary scrutiny than has been the case under the Schulz regime.

In a revealing last interview (Guardian, 6 January), Martin Schulz said of MEPs that: "There are three groups: some are leading an academic discourse on the deepening of the EU, others are leading a brutal course of destruction. Between them are a majority of realistic politicians." His successor needs to encourage the first group and discourage the second. But the 'realistic' majority of MEPs must be cajoled into taking their responsibilities to the European Union more seriously, being prepared to use to the full all of the Parliament's powers of initiative and co-decision, and into recognising their duty of care for the European project, which is in grave danger of faltering.

The European Parliament can save the Union or wreck it. Who leads it matters a lot.

***Andrew Duff is a former MEP and a visiting fellow at the European Policy Centre (EPC).***

*The views expressed in this Discussion Paper are the sole responsibility of the author.*

European Policy Centre ■ 14-16 rue du Trône, 1000 Brussels, Belgium  
Tel: +32 (0)2 231 03 40 ■ Fax: +32 (0)2 231 07 04 ■ Email: [info@epc.eu](mailto:info@epc.eu) ■ Twitter: [@epc\\_eu](https://twitter.com/epc_eu) ■ Website: [www.epc.eu](http://www.epc.eu)



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