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# Awareness of *Spitzenkandidaten* in the 2019 European elections: The effects of news exposure in domestic campaign contexts

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Katjana Gattermann  and Claes de Vreese

## Abstract

With the introduction of the so-called *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure, by which European party families nominate lead candidates for the post of President of the European Commission for European elections, the European Parliament (EP) sought to raise voter awareness and engagement by personalizing the campaigns. This article studies candidate recognition with respect to *Spitzenkandidaten*, which is an important prerequisite in the study of personalization effects on voter behaviour. We use novel survey data collected in 10 European countries in the 2019 EP election campaign ( $n = 17,027$ ). The article focuses on the role of voters' news exposure in various media and argues that news exposure is crucial for candidate recognition, but its effect is contingent upon the domestic campaign context. The article is the first to show that the campaign context matters to the extent that news exposure is particularly relevant in those domestic contexts in which *Spitzenkandidaten* were not previously present. In other campaign contexts additional news exposure adds little to the effect of news exposure on candidate recognition. The results have important implications for understanding EP election campaigns.

## Keywords

Campaigns, comparative research, electoral behaviour, European elections, media exposure, personalization of politics

## Introduction

The 2019 European Parliament (EP) election campaigns continued with the so-called *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure, which was first employed in 2014. By introducing *Spitzenkandidaten*, that is, lead candidates, of European party families competing for the post as President of the European Commission (EC), the EP had sought to raise the awareness and interest of European citizens to participate in the elections and ultimately to enhance the legitimacy of the EP and the EC.<sup>1</sup> The latter objective had already been challenged by scholars after the previous elections (e.g., Christiansen, 2016; Hobolt, 2014). Like in 2014, the outcome of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure was not yet foreseeable during the campaigns because the Council's position was unclear. After the 2019 EP elections it was ultimately disregarded with the provisional abandonment of the procedure. Yet, the question of the procedure's voter mobilization potential remains. Research on the personalization of European Union (EU) politics demonstrated that only few voters across Europe had been aware of the

candidates in the run-up to the 2014 elections (e.g., Gattermann et al., 2016; Schmitt et al., 2015), although the EP evaluated the procedure as a success.<sup>2</sup>

Candidate recognition can conceptually be understood as “cognitive personalization” (Gschwend and Zittel, 2015: 341) and is a pre-condition for any other personalization effects at the behavioural level, such as turnout or vote choice. In other words, scholars first require an understanding about the extent to which European voters are aware of the *Spitzenkandidaten*, before one can assess potential personalization effects on voter behaviour. That is why this article examines recognition of the pan-European

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*Spitzenkandidaten* in the run-up to the 2019 EP elections. It focuses on the role of voters' news exposure in various media and argues that the positive effect of news exposure on candidate recognition is conditional upon the campaign context, particularly, the extent to which voters are familiar with any of the *Spitzenkandidaten* through domestic politics.

The article's contribution to the extant literature is threefold. First, substantially, the article focuses on *awareness* of the pan-European *Spitzenkandidaten* as a dependent variable. With few exceptions (e.g., Gattermann et al., 2016, Popa et al., 2019), research has thus far primarily considered it an explanatory factor for political behaviour and attitudes (e.g., Hobolt, 2014; Popa et al., 2016; Schmitt et al., 2015), although there is a great need to understand the dynamics of this initial step. Second, theoretically, it considers that news exposure effects on cognitive personalization are context-dependent, which has important implications for understanding EU election campaigns. Third, empirically, it relies on novel and rich survey data that have been collected in 10 EU countries in April 2019 (Goldberg et al., 2019), which is before the final phase of the election campaigns had begun. It thus provides a conservative test of our hypotheses as the results could be even more pronounced closer to Election Day.

## Hypotheses

It is well-established in the extant literature that media exposure, *ceteris paribus*, is conducive to knowledge gains, although this effect varies by type of medium (e.g., Barabas and Jerit, 2009; Chaffee and Frank, 1996; Fraile, 2011). Voters also tend to learn from the media about party leaders or candidates in election campaigns (e.g., Bos et al., 2011; Wei and Lo, 2008). However, much of the existing research focussed on single country contexts and we know little about the extent to which the importance of news exposure for learning about election candidates varies across different campaign contexts. Additionally, previous research concentrated on national politics as opposed to international or EU politics. Any news exposure effects on candidate recognition or evaluation are therefore limited to those candidates who are likely to be already somewhat prominent in national politics. However, foreign politicians and particularly EU politicians are likely to be less well-known compared to national politicians. Media may thus play a crucial role for voter awareness of pan-European *Spitzenkandidaten*.

Media reporting about EU affairs has become more comprehensive over time (e.g., Boomgaarden et al., 2010), especially during EP elections (Boomgaarden and de Vreese, 2016). The *Spitzenkandidaten* were also generally visible in traditional media (Schulze, 2016) and on social media (Nulty et al., 2016) during the 2014 EP election campaigns. Furthermore, research has found that exposure to specific news content can affect EU citizens' awareness of political events (Marquart et al., 2019), political responsibilities

(Hobolt and Tilley, 2014) and individual politicians (Gattermann and de Vreese, 2017). Thus, we expect that the more exposed voters are to political news, the more likely that they will come across information that enables them to recognize individual politicians. This is particularly important in the context of EU news because individual *Spitzenkandidaten* may have pursued their political career in other European countries or predominantly at the EU level, which is *de facto* rather removed from most proximate domestic political contexts.

**H1:** Candidate recognition is positively influenced by news exposure.

Despite the overtime growth in EU news reporting, cross-national differences in attention paid to EU actors and particularly *Spitzenkandidaten* persist during EP election campaigns (e.g., Schuck et al., 2011; Schulze, 2016). Likewise, the degree of media personalization, that is, attention paid to individual politicians at the expense of parties or institutions, also varies across Europe (e.g., Kriesi, 2012), especially with respect to EU politicians (Gattermann, 2018). Thus, some European voters are more likely to learn about individual candidates than others. Although we are unable to account for potentially varying degrees of attention paid to individual *Spitzenkandidaten* in the plethora of media sources available to voters across Europe, we assume that some *Spitzenkandidaten* are more prominent in certain countries than others. They have either made their previous career in domestic politics or have been elected in previous EP elections. Consequently, voters are likely to be more aware of those *Spitzenkandidaten* who share the same nationality. For those voters, the effect of news exposure on candidate recognition should be comparatively small. This is because familiarity with these *Spitzenkandidaten* likely also generates awareness of the procedure itself, which by this means provides an access point to information about other *Spitzenkandidaten* competing in the elections. Experimental research shows that prior knowledge predicts further information seeking (e.g., Lecheler and de Vreese, 2017) and is positively associated with learning beyond specific information provided (Valentino et al., 2004). We may thus assume that the information context matters to a similar degree for explaining variation in *Spitzenkandidaten* recognition. Moreover, newspaper coverage of *Spitzenkandidaten* on the whole is more comprehensive in countries from which *Spitzenkandidaten* originate from at a given EP election (Gattermann, 2020). Conversely, news exposure effects are supposedly larger in those countries where no national candidate was among the pan-European *Spitzenkandidaten*. Voters in these countries are likely to be more dependent on information about the – from their perspective – foreign *Spitzenkandidaten* to be able to recognize them.

**H2:** The positive effect of news exposure on candidate recognition is likely to be conditional upon the campaign

context in such way that it is smaller in countries from which at least one *Spitzenkandidat* originated from and larger in countries where no home candidate was standing.

## Data and method

We rely on panel survey data consisting of several pre-election waves collected in 10 EU countries against the backdrop of the 2019 EP elections (Goldberg et al., 2019). The survey was administered by *Kantar* using computer-assisted web interviewing and implementing light quotas on age, education, gender and region. The country sample includes those that represent home countries for one or more *Spitzenkandidaten*, namely the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands. There was no *Spitzenkandidat* from the remaining countries of our sample (France, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Spain and Sweden). We draw our dependent variable, *candidate recognition*, from the wave that was fielded between 5 and 24 April 2019 ( $n = 17,027$ , Online Appendix A). Importantly, campaigning was not yet at the height during this period. The first pan-European debate between five of the *Spitzenkandidaten* only took place in Maastricht on 29 April. Yet, all *Spitzenkandidaten* had been nominated by mid-March. From then onwards they were also visible in traditional, online and social media across several European countries (Gattermann, 2020). Furthermore, Kleinnijenhuis and van Atteveldt (2016) demonstrated that EU news had already been prominent for several months prior to the 2014 EP elections, which is why our time period can be considered part of the campaigns.

The main survey question of interest read “There are a number of politicians running for President of the European Commission. Have you heard of the following candidates?”. A total of seven candidates were listed in random order (Table 1), which represents a selection of prominent and less prominent ones. Only their names were provided, but not their party affiliation or nationality. Respondents were asked to indicate “yes” or “no” for each candidate, which we recoded into 1 and 0, respectively (mean ( $M$ ) = 0.18, standard deviation ( $SD$ ) = 0.39).

**Table 1.** Overview of *Spitzenkandidaten* considered.

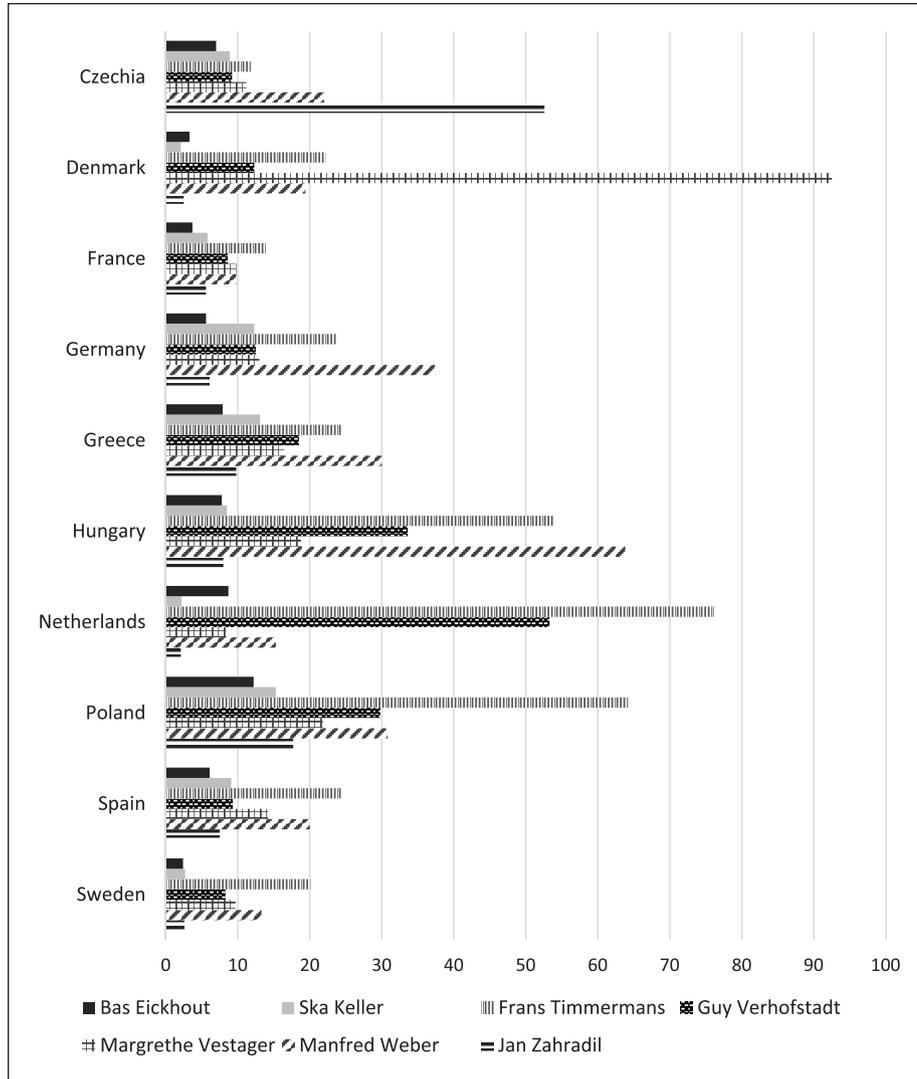
Name	European party family	Country of origin
Bas Eickhout	European Greens	Netherlands
Ska Keller	European Greens	Germany
Frans Timmermans	European Socialists	Netherlands
Guy Verhofstadt	Renew Europe	Belgium
Margrethe Vestager	Renew Europe	Denmark
Manfred Weber	European People’s Party	Germany
Jan Zahradil	European Conservatives and Reformists	Czech Republic

Online Appendix B provides information about in which waves the independent variables were gathered alongside descriptive statistics. Our central independent variable is the *average news exposure* per respondent, which represents the mean of six news exposure items (television, national newspapers, regional newspapers, online media, social media and radio). Respondents were asked “In the past weeks, how much news would you say you followed on the following platforms?”; the scale ranged from 1 “much less than normally” to 7 “much more than normally.” We consider five additional variables that are likely to be positively associated with candidate recognition (see Gattermann et al., 2016; Popa et al., 2019): *political knowledge* comprising the sum of correct responses to five multiple-choice questions (Online Table A6); *internal political efficacy* representing the mean of responses to a maximum of three questions in each sample (7-point scales, Online Table A7); *political interest* in EU politics (7-point scale, ranging from no to high interest); *turnout intention* in the 2019 EP elections (7-point scale, higher values indicate higher certainty to participate); and general *EU integration attitude* (7-point scale, higher values indicate more support). Multicollinearity is not present. Controls at the respondent level comprise gender (*female*), *age* and *education* following the International Standard Classification of Education (higher values indicate higher education levels).

These independent variables do not vary within respondents. However, we stacked the data ( $n = 119,189$ ) and aligned candidate recognition with four additional control variables: (a) the propensity to vote (PTV) for the respective domestic party that is aligned with the European party family of each candidate (11-point scales, Online Appendix B), which is likely to be positively associated with candidate recognition (Gattermann and de Vreese, 2017); (b) a dummy indicating that *several domestic parties* are affiliated with a *Spitzenkandidat*’s party group (0 refers to one party or none); (c) the candidate itself; and (d) a dummy that considers whether a candidate had the same nationality as the respondents (*own candidate*), which is likely to relate to higher levels of candidate recognition. We rely on multilevel logistic regression with respondents nested in countries and compute the models once with and twice without PTVs. The latter have missing values for those candidates for which no major domestic party was competing in the 2019 EP elections and a few additional missing values in four countries (Online Appendix B,  $n = 94,948$ ).<sup>3</sup>

## Findings and discussion

To begin with a descriptive overview, Figure 1 provides the percentages of candidate recognition per *Spitzenkandidat* in each country. Vestager (92.5%), Timmermans



**Figure 1.** Candidate recognition levels per candidate in each country (%).

(76.1%), and Zahradil (52.6%) have the highest recognition levels of all candidates in their home countries. This corresponds to previous research that found higher levels of awareness among voters which share their nationality with a specific *Spitzenkandidat* (Hobolt, 2014). Only 37.4% of German respondents recognized Weber. He was better known in Hungary (63.8%) and the most prominent candidate in Greece (30.0%). Timmermans was most often recognized of all candidates in Poland (64.3%), Spain (24.5%), Sweden (20.1%) and France (13.9%). The former Belgian Prime Minister Verhofstadt was most often recognized in the Netherlands (53.3%), potentially because he speaks Dutch as a Fleming, Hungary (33.6%) and Poland (29.8%). The two Green candidates, Eickhout and Keller, were not very prominent – not even at home. Eickhout was recognized by 12.2% of Polish respondents compared to 8.7% of Dutch respondents. Likewise, recognition levels for Keller were

higher among Polish (15.3%) and Greek (13.1%) voters compared to German voters (12.3%).

As can already be seen from Figure 1, there are generally significant differences in the mean number of *Spitzenkandidaten* recognized across countries (Online Table A10, Online Appendix C).<sup>4</sup> Hungarian ( $M = 1.94$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ) and Polish ( $M = 1.92$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ) voters recognized the highest number of candidates on average, while these figures are lowest for French ( $M = 0.57$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ) and Swedish ( $M = 0.59$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ) voters. However, no *Spitzenkandidat* originated from any of these countries. For the remaining countries, the mean number of recognized candidates were significantly higher among Dutch ( $M = 1.66$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) and Danish ( $M = 1.54$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) voters, compared to Czech ( $M = 1.23$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ), Greek ( $M = 1.20$ ,  $SD = 1.61$ ) and German ( $M = 1.11$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ) voters and relative to Spanish voters ( $M = 0.91$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ).<sup>5</sup> Thus, having a national candidate running for President of

**Table 2.** Multilevel logistic regressions, predicting candidate recognition.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
Average news exposure	0.198***	0.012	0.210***	0.011	0.224***	0.040
Political knowledge	0.172***	0.008	0.155***	0.007	0.157***	0.007
Internal political efficacy	0.123***	0.009	0.118***	0.008	0.117***	0.008
Political interest (European Union)	0.267***	0.008	0.273***	0.007	0.272***	0.007
Turnout intention	0.0215***	0.006	0.0107**	0.005	0.0105**	0.005
EU integration attitude	0.0498***	0.006	0.0473***	0.005	0.0467***	0.005
Female respondent	-0.128***	0.020	-0.0887***	0.018	-0.0887***	0.018
Age	0.00295***	0.001	-0.000269	0.001	-0.0000782	0.001
Education	0.0461***	0.006	0.0372***	0.005	0.0376***	0.005
Propensity to vote	0.0227***	0.003	-	-	-	-
Several dominant parties	0.257***	0.029	0.349***	0.021	0.347***	0.021
Timmermans (ref. Weber)	0.525***	0.028	0.527***	0.027	0.527***	0.027
Verhofstadt	-0.0293	0.034	-0.0983***	0.029	-0.0981***	0.029
Vestager	-0.206***	0.034	-0.309***	0.029	-0.310***	0.029
Eickhout	-2.094***	0.051	-1.771***	0.040	-1.770***	0.040
Keller	-1.650***	0.045	-1.355***	0.036	-1.355***	0.036
Zahradil	-1.129***	0.038	-1.106***	0.034	-1.108***	0.034
Own candidate	2.518***	0.033	2.419***	0.031	2.410***	0.031
Constant	-5.411***	0.209	-5.094***	0.196	-5.169***	0.312
<i>Random effects, country level</i>						
Average news exposure	-	-	-	-	-2.105***	0.246
Variance component	-0.487**	0.224	-0.544**	0.224	-0.0402	0.230
<i>n</i>	94948		119189		119189	
Log likelihood	-34830.3		-44232.8		-44191.8	
Wald $\chi^2$	12504.4		14948.7		14136.6	
Prob > $\chi^2$	< 0.001		< 0.001		< 0.001	

Note: all models show coefficients in first column and standard errors in second column, \* $p < 0.10$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

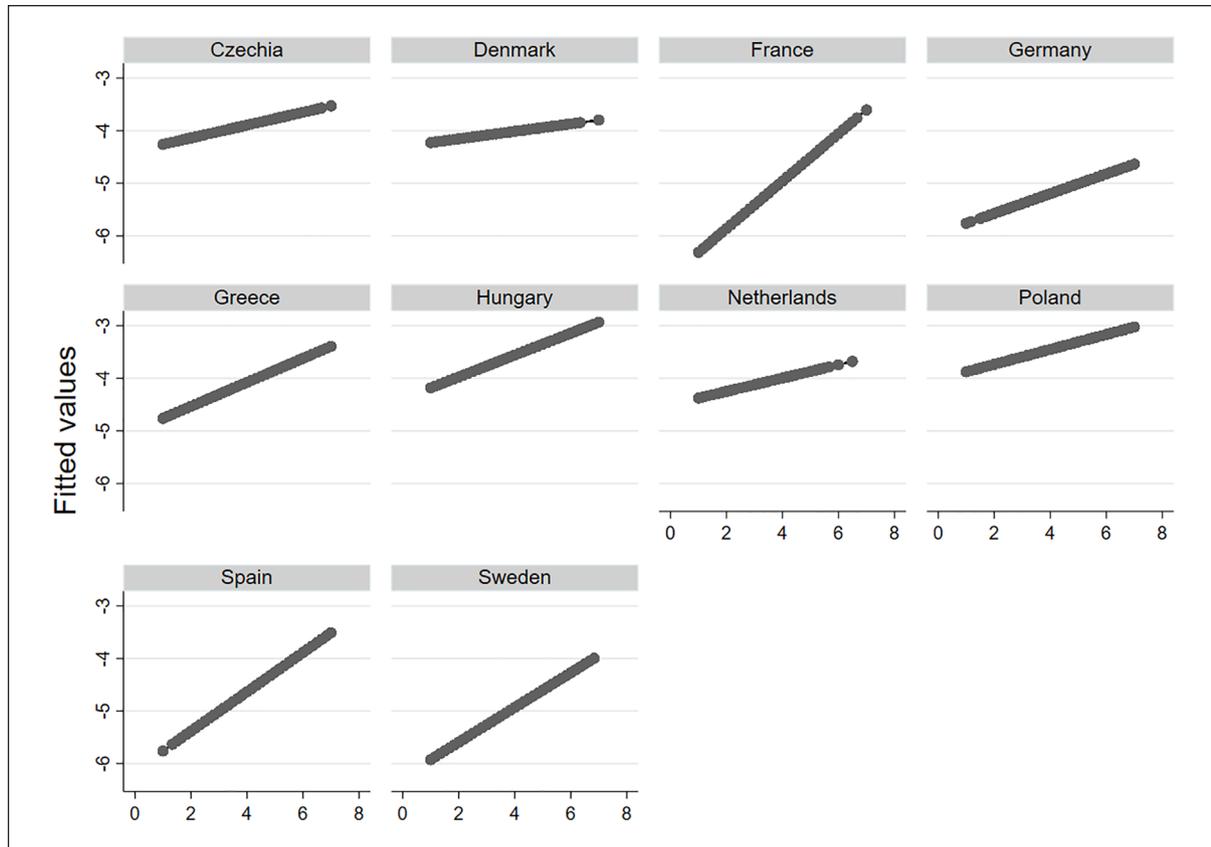
the EC does not automatically translate into higher recognition levels of *Spitzenkandidaten*.

To investigate the explanatory factors, we turn to Table 2, which includes three multi-level regression models. Model 1 contains PTVs; Models 2 and 3 omit them. Model 3 additionally includes the effect of average news exposure at the country level, which is depicted graphically in Figure 2.<sup>6</sup>

The results in Table 2 lend support to H1, which stipulated that news exposure has a positive effect on candidate recognition. The effect holds when either controlling for PTVs ( $b = 0.198$ , Model 1) or omitting them ( $b = 0.210$ , Model 2). Likewise, higher levels of political knowledge, internal political efficacy, political interest in EU politics, and turnout intention as well as more support for EU integration have a statistically significant and positive association with candidate recognition in all models. Female respondents are less likely to recognize any of the *Spitzenkandidaten*, while older and higher educated voters are more likely to recognize them. The PTV for the respective domestic party of a *Spitzenkandidat* also increases the likelihood to recognize him or her ( $b = 0.023$ , Model 1), which corroborates extant research on domestic candidates in EU elections (Gattermann and de Vreese, 2017). The

likelihood for candidate recognition increases if several domestic parties are associated with the European party of a *Spitzenkandidat* compared to no party or just one party. This suggests that information received by domestic parties is crucial for awareness of *Spitzenkandidaten* (see also Popa et al., 2019); and, the more parties which provide this information, the better for candidate recognition. Timmermans is generally more often recognized than Weber, followed by the remaining candidates. Lastly, if the candidate has the same nationality as voters, the latter are significantly more likely to recognize him or her, when controlling for PTVs ( $b = 2.518$ , Model 1) or not ( $b = 2.419$ , Model 2).

H2 stipulated that the positive effect of news exposure on candidate recognition is conditional upon the domestic campaign context. It is statistically significant at the country level ( $b = -2.105$ , Model 3). As Figure 2 shows, news exposure adds comparatively little to recognition levels in the Czech Republic, Denmark and – to a lesser extent – in the Netherlands. Since some *Spitzenkandidaten* originated from these countries, the results suggest that the national candidates had been so prominent already that additional news exposure only has small effects on candidate recognition. The reverse is the case for France, Spain and Sweden,



**Figure 2.** Fitted values for average news exposure, by country.  
 Note: calculations based on Model 3, Table 2.

which did not provide their own *Spitzenkandidaten*. Here, news exposure has a considerable positive effect. Put differently, news exposure during EP election campaigns appears to be crucial in those countries which do not have a direct link to the *Spitzenkandidaten*.

However, the findings are not as clear cut for the remaining countries. The positive effect of news exposure on candidate recognition increases to a similar degree with additional news exposure in Germany, Greece, Hungary and Poland, albeit at different levels of candidate recognition. In Germany, this suggests that neither Weber nor Keller could be considered prominent candidates that drew attention to the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure. Here, compared to other countries with national candidates, additional news exposure made a considerable difference. Conversely, the results for Greece, Hungary and Poland suggest that some foreign *Spitzenkandidaten* were already so well-known that additional news exposure made less difference compared to voters in France, Spain or Sweden. Greek voters may well have been alert to the procedure and therewith individual *Spitzenkandidaten* because their then Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras, had been a prominent *Spitzenkandidat* for the 2014 EP elections (see Hobolt, 2014). Hungarian voters may have heard of Verhofstadt before as he had publicly clashed with their Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Likewise, Weber's

European People's Party suspended the membership of its Hungarian member Fidesz in March 2019. And, Polish voters may have particularly heard of Timmermans beforehand, who as Vice-President of the EC had triggered Article 7 in December 2017 in response to Poland's judiciary reforms that had been considered in breach with the rule of law. This may partially explain the comparatively small effect of news exposure on candidate recognition in these countries. Given the variation in the results, we extend our argument underlying H2 beyond the nationality of *Spitzenkandidaten*: the positive effect of news exposure on candidate recognition is conditional upon the extent to which voters are familiar with any of the *Spitzenkandidaten* through domestic politics, such as through a previous political career or through other political developments.

## Conclusion

This article sought to shed light on the role news exposure plays for candidate recognition against the background of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure employed in EP elections. It relied on novel survey data collected in 10 countries during the 2019 EP election campaign. We argued that news exposure is crucial for candidate recognition, but its effect is contingent upon the campaign context.

Our study is the first to show that the campaign context matters to the extent that news exposure is particularly relevant in those contexts in which *Spitzenkandidaten* were not previously present. In other campaign contexts, additional news exposure adds little to the effect of news exposure on candidate recognition. We acknowledge that this relationship may potentially change over the course of the campaigns. Moreover, our survey is cross-sectional and thus any causal relationships could also be reverse. Although we specifically asked respondents about their news exposure in the preceding weeks, those who were aware of *Spitzenkandidaten* may have been actively seeking information through additional news exposure.

Cognitive personalization is a necessary pre-condition for understanding any additional personalization effects that are possibly associated with the *Spitzenkandidaten* (see Gschwend and Zittel, 2015: 341). It also means, however, that candidate recognition is not a sufficient assessment criterion for the success of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure. Rather, candidate recognition needs to have consequences for electoral behaviour, including turnout and vote choice. Furthermore, election outcomes must be consequential at the political level, as was the case with the election of former *Spitzenkandidat* Jean-Claude Juncker as EC President in 2014; if not, the procedure will likely backfire and undermine the legitimacy of European institutions.

The *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure played an important role in 2014 and 2019 (see also Daniel and Obholzer, this issue), but the political context and consequences differed in both EP elections. Likewise, empirical studies of candidate recognition relied on different operationalizations and considerations in the research design (e.g., Gattermann et al., 2016; Hobolt, 2014; Schmitt et al., 2015), which impedes a direct comparison of recognition levels for both EP elections. However, we underline that the procedure is conditional upon the individual *Spitzenkandidaten* themselves and it makes a difference for candidate recognition whether candidates have a political affiliation with the domestic political context or not, such as through a previous domestic political career or through other relevant political developments that have added to the prominence of a foreign *Spitzenkandidat* within a particular country. It thus remains questionable whether the EP's aim to raise voter awareness with the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure was indeed successful. Finally, we acknowledge that mere self-reported news exposure measures are limited (e.g., de Vreese and Neijens, 2016) and additionally measure increase rather than actual amount. We recommend that future research links specific news content about the candidates to media exposure (e.g., see Gattermann and de Vreese, 2017).

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### Supplemental material

The supplementary files are available at <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/2053168020915332>. The replication files are available at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/UKFBUQ>

### Notes

1. See European Parliament resolution of 22 November 2012 (2012/2829 (RSP)).
2. European Parliament decision of 7 February 2018 (2017/2233(ACI)).
3. As an additional robustness check, we also fitted a negative binomial regression model with total number of recognized candidates as dependent variable (Online Table A12,  $n = 17,027$ ). Those independent variables that vary by *Spitzenkandidat* were excluded. Despite this more lenient approach, the results are similar to those presented above (see also Online Figure A2).
4. For this, the binary variables of individual candidate recognition were added up (0–7).
5. These patterns are similar for the mean number of recognized foreign candidates (Online Table A11).
6. Online Table A9, Model 1, and Online Figure A1 additionally include propensities to vote. The results are similar.

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