

**The *Spitzenkandidaten* Process in 2024:
Does the Lead Candidate Process Promote European Union Democratic Legitimacy?”
Dr. Steven D. Roper, Florida Atlantic University**

The 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections were perhaps the most consequential set of EP elections since 1979. As a national referendum, the EP elections witnessed significant losses for sitting governments in France and Germany and precipitated the calling of a snap parliament election in France. The newly formed far right political group, Patriots for Europe, continued the success of the former Identity and Democracy political group while the centrist political group, Renew, suffered significant losses. Once again, the European People’s Party (EPP) retained a plurality of seats; however unlike in 2019, the EPP lead candidate, Ursula von der Leyen, was chosen as Commission President. The *Spitzenkandidaten* process envisions the selection of the Commission President by having the major European political parties and EP political groups nominate a candidate for President prior to the EP elections. This change, introduced in the Lisbon Treaty, was intended to link EP voting and elections to the ultimate selection of the executive.

The first test of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process occurred in the 2014 EP elections (the first held after the TEU entered force) in which EPP’s candidate, Jean-Claude Juncker, was chosen as President. The 2019 elections were a return to the old *status quo* in which the elected President, Ursula von der Leyen, was not a lead candidate calling into question the democratic deficit of EU institutions. This research project found that there is continued support for the *Spitzenkandidaten* process. In 2024, there was a return to the *Spitzenkandidaten* process as von der Leyen was chosen by the EPP as its presidential candidate at the EPP March Congress, and most of the EP political groups nominated a lead or *Spitzenkandidaten* candidate with the exception of the groups on the far right. EP elections in 2029 will be a significant test of whether the *Spitzenkandidaten* process has finally become institutionalized within the selection process of the Commission President.