

Let voters pick the socialist leader for EU election

An open vote would provide a sense of transparency and accountability, and give Europeans the right and the power to decide.

By **GEORGE PAPANDREOU** | 10/17/18, 4:01 AM CET | Updated 10/18/18, 4:29 AM CET



A man casts his ballot for the European Parliament elections in 2014 | Fred Dufour/AFP via Getty Images

ATHENS — We European socialists risk missing a historic opportunity to bring EU citizens into the democratic process.

Rather than choosing our candidate for European Commission president through obscure party mechanisms, we should open up our selection process — as my Panhellenic Socialist Movement did in Greece in 2004 — to a completely open vote.

Doing so would empower EU citizens to choose their leaders at a European level, kick off an energetic debate across the Continent and provide a powerful rebuttal to populist complaints that our system is anti-democratic.

In the 2014 European election, we socialists agreed to participate in the so-called *Spitzenkandidat* process, in which European parties each put forward a candidate to campaign for the Commission presidency.

It was an important first step, and it set an important precedent when the European Council respected the result of the process and agreed to appoint Jean-Claude Juncker — the *Spitzenkandidat* of the party that received the most votes in the European Parliament election — as Commission president.

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But it's time to be bolder! The *Spitzenkandidat* process was a tacit recognition that the European Union needs to find ways to give more power to its citizens. But it is only as meaningful as the democratic procedures of the political parties involved in the process.

This is where we democratic socialists can make a difference.

Our party has chosen an elaborate process to decide on our *Spitzenkandidat*. Each candidate must secure the endorsement of nine national parties, with the final decision to be taken at our congress in December.

Each member party is free to decide the process by which it will choose which candidate to support. Sadly, few have chosen an open, inclusive method. Usually, the decision is made by local party officials.

This is hardly a method that will inspire or empower our voters. It leaves us open to accusations that we are taking decisions far away from our constituencies.

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Right now, we have two excellent candidates who have declared their intention to seek the socialist nomination: Maroš Šefčovič and Frans Timmermans. I respect them both.

But my opinion is beside the point. It should be our voters who decide.

My socialist party in Greece was the first in Europe to implement an open vote in choosing our leadership. In 2004, I was elected in an open primary where all members and friends could participate. (Migrants, refugees, non-Greek residents were allowed to take part.)

In that election and in the one that followed, approximately 1 million voters participated — a huge turnout for a country of 10 million.

Other European parties followed suit, and the result was an engaging debate and rising membership numbers.

It's time to transplant this experience to the European level. The Party of European Socialists can and should open up the selection of our *Spitzenkandidat* to a direct vote by the members of our national parties and their friends.

Those who will represent us should not be accountable to narrow national interests or behind-the-scenes compromises, but should instead be selected according to the answers they provide to the social and economic challenges facing Europe.

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With a direct vote, candidates would have to campaign throughout Europe, openly discuss their visions for the EU, debate opposing views on national and local media, and attempt to inspire support and participation of all, beyond borders, irrespective of country of origin.

This would provide a sense of transparency and accountability to our movement and give Europeans the right and the power to decide.

It would also mobilize participation in the coming elections and contribute to the creation of a European political identity, of a sovereign Europe built by its people, not just a remote elite.

An open vote would also provide a potent antidote to the toxic ultranationalism that is plaguing our Continent. It would show that Europe is a project that respects each and every citizen and that can come together to work for a common good, where all, collectively, have a say.

Citizens have, again and again, demanded greater say in European decisions. “Take back control” was the war cry of the Brexiteers. And even if the solution they offered seems to have offered less, rather than more, control, the request for a voice in the European project is deeply democratic.

Given the political will, it is possible to organize an open vote for our *Spitzenkandidat* in the next few months. Choosing candidate and political platform is of great importance, but the process must be owned by our citizens.

By bringing them to the decision-making table, we can bring a new spirit of participation and ownership to the European project and to social democracy.

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