

## This time it's different? Effects of the Eurovision Debate on young citizens' and its consequence for EU democracy – evidence from a quasi-experiment in 24 countries

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## This time it's different? Effects of the Eurovision Debate on young citizens' and its consequence for EU democracy – evidence from a quasi-experiment in 24 countries

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\*Inta Brikse and Aldo Di Virgilio passed away before the paper was published. We are saddened by their loss and dedicate this paper to their memory.

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#### ABSTRACT

For the very first time in EU history, the 2014 EP elections provided citizens with the opportunity to influence the nomination of the Commission President by casting a vote for the main Europarties' 'lead candidates'. By subjecting the position of the Commission President to an open political contest, many experts have formulated the expectation that heightened political competition would strengthen the weak electoral connection between EU citizens and EU legislators, which some consider a root cause for the EU's lack of public support. In particular, this contest was on display in the so-called 'Eurovision Debate', a televised debate between the main contenders for the Commission President broadcasted live across Europe. Drawing on a quasi-experimental study conducted in 24 EU countries, we find that debate exposure led to increased cognitive and political involvement and EU support among young citizens. Unfortunately, the debate has only reached a very small audience.

**KEYWORDS** EP election campaign; EU attitudes; political knowledge; televised debate

## Introduction

Concerns about the European Union's (EU) democratic qualities are as old as the European integration project itself, as are suggestions and attempts to remedy the EU's democratic deficit. The creation and gradual expansion of the European Parliament's (EP) prerogatives and, in particular, the introduction of direct elections to the EP in 1979, are among the major institutional innovations to address this deficit (see, e.g., Rittberger 2012; Tulli 2016). However, expectations that the empowerment of the EP over time and the introduction of direct elections would strengthen the electoral connection between citizens and elected EU legislators have been largely disappointed (see Hix and Hoyland 2013). In sharp contrast to national elections and parliaments, EP elections are much less attractive to voters, as the considerably

lower (and declining) turnout rates indicate. Consequently, EP elections have been referred to as 'second-order national elections' (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Parties, media and ultimately also voters treat them as national contests, with EU-related issues taking a backseat.

Follesdal and Hix (2006) have advanced a powerful argument that the key to mend the weak electoral connection is to foster political competition at the EU-level. Absent a true electoral contest at the EU-level, whose outcome would affect the course of the EU's policy agenda and absent a choice to determine the EU's top political personnel, the electoral connection is likely to stay weak (Follesdal and Hix 2006: 552). While battles over the direction of the EU's policy agenda have become a regular feature of political decision-making inside the EP as well as between the EP and the Council (Hix and Hoyland 2013), these developments have, thus far, not affected electoral competition in the run-up to EP elections. At the same time, aspirations are high that a contest over the EU's (top) personnel decisions might be more effective in infusing competition in the electoral campaign preceding EP elections: One of the most important posts in the EU's political system is the President of the European Commission, who defines the Commission's work programme and thus sets its policy-making priorities. For many observers, the 'role of the Commission is not fundamentally different from other political executives.' (Follesdal and Hix 2006: 554; Hix 2008: 155). Hence, subjecting the office of the Commission President to an open political contest rather than letting heads of state and government pick their preferred candidate in 'smoked filled rooms' has become a battle call for academics, pundits and politicians sharing concerns about the EU's democratic deficit and lack of political competition. A contest for one of the EU's top political offices should contribute to mend the electoral connection: Citizens are likely to be better informed about EU policy objectives when there are competitive elections and higher stakes, they should also be more motivated to participate in EP elections, and possibly confer a higher degree of legitimacy and the EU as a polity (see, e.g., Follesdal and Hix 2006; Hix 2008).

With the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, political activists and elites were now presented with a new institutional mechanism, which was premised on the idea to connect voters with the exercise of political power at the EU-level.<sup>1</sup> Prior to the Lisbon Treaty, the European Council nominated a candidate for Commission President, and once the heads of state and government had made up their minds, the chosen candidate was submitted to the EP for approval. Article 17(7) of the Treaty on European Union, which was amended through the Lisbon Treaty, now stipulates:

Taking into account the elections to the European Parliament and after having held the appropriate consultations, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall propose to the European Parliament a candidate for President of

the Commission. This candidate shall be elected by the European Parliament by a majority of its component members. (Publications Office of the European Union 2010: 26)

In the run-up to the 2014 EP elections, political pressure emanated from the Commission and the EP, as well as from several national capitals to fundamentally alter the nomination process for the successor of José Manuel Barroso, then Commission President at the time. Both, Barroso, the main party groups in the EP, and the majority of transnational European party groups (Europarties) called for a process whereby each Europarty would nominate a 'lead candidate' for the Commission's top office. These lead candidates would, in turn, play a central role in the political campaign for the 2014 EP elections. While the implementation of the lead candidate-concept was hotly contested (see, e.g., Hobolt 2014), it also marked a watershed, since each Europarty did in fact nominate a transnational candidate for the Commission's top post.

The 2014 EP election campaign thus provides for an ideal quasi-experimental setting to explore whether the expectation that increased political competition improves the electoral connection and hence the quality of democracy is borne out in reality. In this article, our focus is on one particular innovation of the 2014 EP election campaign, which is directly connected to the contest of different lead candidates for the position of Commission President: The campaign included a series of televised debates among these candidates, the most prominent of which took place on 15 May 2014. The so-called 'Eurovision debate', a multilingual 90-minute discussion among the Europarty nominees for Commission President, addressed some of the most pressing problems facing the EU and was broadcasted on numerous TV stations, radio channels and internet streams throughout and even beyond the EU. The Eurovision debate was the culmination of a series of televised debates (totalling seven) during the 2014 EP election campaign. What rendered the Eurovision debate special compared to the other debates was that it starred all five top candidates for the post, whereas in the other debates only two to four candidates were invited (sometimes not even including the top candidates). Moreover, the Eurovision debate was broadcasted in the vast majority of the EU member states, while the other debates were aired in only a subset of member states (for an overview see Maier and Faas 2014).

Hence, for the very first time in the history of the EU an overwhelming majority of EU citizens had the unprecedented opportunity to compare the positions and personalities of the candidates running for Commission President in a campaign format familiar from the context of national elections. In this article we inquire whether the debate generated the desired effect, i.e., did it contribute to improving the EU's democratic quality because EU citizens now have an actual opportunity to influence who will be the next

Commission President?<sup>2</sup> The literature on televised debates at the national level has demonstrated that these campaign formats affect voters, i.e., their cognitions, motivations, attitudes, and even voting choices. Whether this has been the case in the 2014 European election and whether the TV debate format incites electoral competition are open questions, which this article sets out to address. To do so, we present the results of a quasi-experimental study with young voters conducted in 24 EU member states. Since we have carried out a quasi-experiment with self-selected student samples, our data are neither representative for any of the countries under investigation nor for young voters. Hence, like other lab-experiments our data lack external validity. Nevertheless, these data are very valuable as it has a high degree of internal validity. In addition, there is evidence that voluntary student samples are appropriate for experimental effect studies (see Druckman and Kam 2011).

We proceed as follows: In the next section (2.), we will bring together some of the key arguments from the EU's democratic deficit-debate, hinted at above, and the literature on televised debates to develop expectations about the possible effects of the Eurovision debate on voters: This will allow us to analyse, in the next step, whether political competition improves voter knowledge about candidates, whether it motivates them to cast a vote, and whether competition affects EU-related attitudes. In section 3, we describe the research design and data, followed by an empirical analysis of the impact of the Eurovision debate (4.). Our results show that the debate had a recognizable impact on our respondents, indicating higher cognitive and political involvement, as well as attitudinal changes. In the final section (5.) we will critically discuss these findings and suggest avenues for further research.

## **Electoral competition and EU support: insights from research on TV debates**

Following Robert Dahl (1971), a democratic polity ought to be responsive to the preferences of its citizens, and for government to be responsive it has to provide guarantees for effective public participation as well as for public policies and electoral offices to be open to public contestation. Moreover, for decisions to be meaningful and informed there has to be access to alternative sources of information. Follesdal and Hix (2006) echo the Dahlian perspective on democracy when they diagnose that a lack of public contestation is at the core of the EU's democratic legitimacy deficit. Introducing contestation by means of a debate on EU issues combined with an electoral contest about the EU's top executive post should, so they argue, lessen the legitimacy deficit and mend the electoral connection between citizens and EU legislators (Hix 2008: 86). What about the mechanisms linking electoral competition and a growing sense of democratic legitimacy? Political contestation strengthens the

subjective content of democracy by providing a battle for control of political power and the policy agenda at the European level, between rival groups of leaders with rival policy platforms, where the winner and losers of this battle are clearly identifiable (Hix 2008: 85).

More competition 'would also enable citizens to understand European policy issues, to form opinions about the options available, and in time accept why certain reforms are necessary rather than reject any policy change directed from Brussels as illegitimate' (Hix 2008: 108). Heightened political contestation and debate are thus hypothesized to affect citizens' attitudes toward the EU and, in turn, positively impact the EU's perceived democratic quality. Could exposure to a televised debate among the top candidates for the Commission Presidency affect voters' knowledge about the EU, increase their motivation and ability to form opinions about EU issues, as suggested by the proponents of instilling more political contestation into the EU arena?

First, a televised debate in the run-up to the EP elections could have an impact on citizens' *political cognitions*: 'A debate would make the candidates more widely recognizable, and enable [...] the public to understand the personal and policy differences between the candidates' (Hix 2008: 161). More precisely, Hix (2008: 162) suggests 'the public would be able to identify who the Commission president is and what he or she aims to achieve'. Turning to the debate literature, the majority of debate researchers agree that viewers do learn from debates – subjectively as well as objectively. After watching a debate, recipients usually know more about the issues debated and candidates debating them. Learning effects are particularly pronounced for less known candidates (see, e.g., Holbrook 1999; Zhu *et al.* 1994) and candidates running for one's 'own' party (see, e.g., Abramowitz 1978; Jacoby *et al.* 1986). In addition, recipients do not only learn factual information. They often also consider themselves better informed about politics afterwards than prior to the debate (see, e.g., Kaid *et al.* 2000). This effect has already been demonstrated for German viewers of the Eurovision debate (Dinter and Weissenbach 2015). Based on these findings, we could expect that a debate among candidates for the post of Commission President should lead to a greater awareness of the candidates and their respective stances on EU policies. We therefore expect that watching the debate increases the ability of viewers' to make judgements about the candidates' personal and political profiles (H1). In addition, we expect that debate exposure increases viewers' sense about being informed about the EU and EU politics (H2).

Second, more competitive and consequential elections could also have an effect on the *motivations* underlying political involvement and political participation. Hix (2013: 11) states this expectation quite clearly: 'If a party-based contest for the President of the Commission emerges in 2014 [...] some citizens in Europe would feel they have influenced the choice of the most powerful office in the EU for the first time.' Moreover, Follesdal and Hix (2006: 550) assume that 'competition fosters political debate' and thus assume that

exposure to a leadership contest should increase campaign interest and campaign communication. It should also instil a sense of internal efficacy, i.e., the feeling that people have some means of influence on EU politics. The debate literature provides ample evidence that debates can stimulate the *motivations* underlying electoral participation. In particular, it has been demonstrated that watching televised debates usually increases campaign interest (see, e.g., Pfau 1987; Weaver and Drew 2001). Moreover, debate viewership correlates with higher turnout (see, e.g., Best and Hubbard 1999). In particular, it positively affects participation of voters with a low level of campaign interest (Maier and Faas 2011). There is less conclusive evidence when it comes to the effects on viewers' feeling of internal efficacy. Based on the findings in the existing literature, we expect that exposure to a televised debate will increase campaign interest (H3). Given the new features of the 2014 EP election campaign with 'lead candidates' competing for the office of Commission President, we also expect that watching the debate will strengthen viewers' feeling of internal efficacy (H4) even though there is little evidence in the literature pertaining to this so far (see, e.g., Hobolt 2014). Viewers might very well understand though that – for the very first time since the first direct elections to the EP in 1979 – they have an actual say in deciding on the EU's top personnel and the EU's political agenda. After all, Monica Maggioni, the moderator of the Eurovision debate, as well as Alexis Tsipras and Martin Schulz emphasized in the course of the televised debate that one of the European parties' top candidates would serve as the next Commission President, which also reflected the overall media tone in the run-up to the election – even though some national governments were hesitant to fully accept the new procedure prior to the elections. Overall, we think that there is good reason to believe that the audience of the debate accepted these claims, which in turn leads us to expect a positive effect of watching the debate on viewers' internal efficacy.

Third, heightened political competition can have consequences for *political attitudes* about the EU. Follesdal and Hix (2006: 550) posit 'political competition is an essential vehicle for opinion formation. Competition fosters political debate, which in turn promotes the formation of public opinion on different policy options'. Following this line of reasoning, political competition could potentially counteract the second-order character of EP elections, which still 'have very little to do with "Europe"' (Hix 2008: 79). Thus, boosting political competition should increase the relevance of candidates running for office at the EU-level and of EU issues.<sup>3</sup> More precisely, Hix (2008) claims that, instead of focussing on the national policy agenda more electoral competition will highlight the relevance of EU issues and contribute to the EU's perceived legitimacy. Turning to the debate literature, the actual influence of debates on *political attitudes* (and *voting behaviour*, which is not the focus of this contribution) is heavily disputed. While two meta-analyses (Benoit *et al.* 2003; McKinney and Warner 2013) indicate that viewing televised debates affects

issue preferences, attitudes towards the candidates as well as voting behaviour, most studies on debates in the U.S. suggest that debates can only reinforce already existing attitudes and voting intentions rather than transform them (for a summary see McKinney and Carlin 2004). These findings tie in with the results from classical campaign research that a reinforcement of existing attitudes and voting intentions is the most important campaign effect. Mechanisms of selective exposure and selective information processing usually prevent individuals from receiving 'wrong', i.e., contradictory information, and thus from changing their attitudes (Lazarsfeld *et al.* 1944). On the other hand, debate exposure strengthens the perceived importance of the issues debated (see, e.g., Benoit *et al.* 2003). The picture for debates in European states is less clear-cut. For some European countries the impact of debates seems to be rather limited (e.g., Maricchiolo *et al.* 2010), whereas studies for other countries suggest that debates are more persuasive. For instance, it has been demonstrated that almost one fifth of the Croatian voters changed their voting intention after the 2005 debates (Skoko 2005). Furthermore, significant parts of the German electorate changed their opinions about the respective candidates running for chancellor and even revised their voting intentions after watching a debate (see, e.g., Maier and Faas 2011). The strongest impact was observed for citizens not identifying with a particular political party, but there were also significant conversion effects for people with an existing party attachment (see, e.g., Maier and Faas 2011). In addition, existing research also indicates that the Eurovision debate affected candidate evaluations. Most of the candidates for Commission President were perceived more positively by German voters after watching the debate (Dinter and Weissenbach 2015). In addition, exposure to the debate significantly increased favourable opinions about EU integration and reduced fears about the EU (Maier *et al.* 2016).

Finally, debates can also have an impact on more general attitudes about the political system. The few studies available indicate that watching debates causes more favourable evaluations of the political system (Wald and Lupfer 1978). This is particularly true for young German voters following the Eurovision Debate (Maier 2015). Based on these findings, we contend that exposure to the Eurovision debate should increase the perception that important problems should be solved by the EU (rather than at the national level) (H5). Furthermore, based on studies indicating that positive media coverage of the EU should lead to more positive EU attitudes (for a summary see, e.g., Hobolt and Tilley 2014: 87) as well as on research suggesting that one major focus of the Eurovision debate was to highlight the virtues of the EU (de Vreese and van der Brug 2016), we expect debate viewership to result in more positive attitudes about the EU as a polity (H6). These expectations are consistent with the findings that televised debates can have agenda-setting effects and increase positive attitudes about the political system as a whole.

## Research design

To assess the impact of the Eurovision Debate<sup>4</sup> among the five top candidates nominated by the respective Europarties – Jean-Claude Juncker (European People’s Party), Martin Schulz (Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats), Guy Verhofstadt (Alliance for Democrats and Liberals for Europe), Ska Keller (Greens/European Free Alliance), Alexis Tsipras (European United Left) – we set up a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest study in 24 European countries (for details see online appendix 1). In total, 828 eligible voters (mostly students) watched the debate as it was broadcasted live on a large screen in their respective universities.<sup>5</sup> Reception modes differed across countries, depending on whether or not a national broadcasting station aired the debate. 78.0 per cent of the participants were able to watch the debate simultaneously, translated in their national language; 13.8 per cent watched the original version of the debate as provided by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU; candidates were either speaking in English or with simultaneous translation into English), although this was in most cases not the native language of our participants.<sup>6</sup> Immediately prior and immediately after the debate the participants were asked to fill in questionnaires.<sup>7</sup> The questionnaires included questions on campaign interest, attitudes towards European integration, knowledge about the EU, knowledge about and attitudes towards the candidates, expectations about (posttest: perceptions of) the debate and the candidates’ debate performance, perceptions of the EP election campaign, voting intentions, demographics (pretest only), and – in cases the debate was not provided in the respondents’ mother tongue – how well they understood the debate<sup>8</sup> (posttest only).<sup>9</sup>

In general, the basic design of this study is similar to a design, which has been successfully applied in the past to explore the impact of televised debates in Germany for a series of debates there (see, e.g., German Longitudinal Election Study 2014; Maier and Faas 2003; Maurer *et al.* 2007). Such a strict pretest-posttest design, in which participants fill out questionnaires immediately prior to the debate and also directly afterwards, allows us to trace possible effects of the debate – in line with our hypotheses presented above – on the participants of the study in a rigorous manner. We do want to stress, though, that the design of our study does not include a control group. Strictly speaking, without such a control group, we are not able to separate effects of the pretest questionnaire from effects of the treatment (i.e., the debate). As there is evidence that our sample does not suffer from questionnaire effects we consider any statistically significant deviation from zero as an impact of the debate.<sup>10</sup> Other data confirm this assessment.<sup>11</sup>

In order to analyse the data we decided to weight the countries according to their population size. The basic idea behind this weighting procedure is to get an impression of how young and well-educated citizens across Europe

respond to the campaign. By weighting the data we want to avoid that our results are affected by the scholars' resources, opportunities, and experiences with experimental research, which might have affected the sample sizes obtained in the individual countries.<sup>12</sup> The weighted data set includes 51.8 per cent female respondents (minimum: 7.7 per cent in Slovenia; maximum 81.0 per cent in Romania;  $F = 1.98$ ,  $df = 23$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The average age is 22.9 years (minimum: 20.0 years in Lithuania; maximum: 29.7 years in Ireland;  $F = 6.33$ ,  $df = 23$ ,  $p < .001$ ). 93.6 per cent of the participants are students (minimum: 83.3 per cent in France; the sample consists exclusively of students in Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Portugal, and Sweden;  $F = 2.41$ ,  $df = 23$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Most of the students are enrolled in a political science programme (38.5 per cent), a social science programme (23.2 per cent), or a programme in communication studies (18.0 per cent). 20.3 per cent of the students were enrolled in another programme ( $\chi^2 = 653.47$ ,  $df = 69$ ,  $p < .001$ ). From those participants who followed the debate in English, without English being their native language, 1.4 per cent indicated that they understood less than 50 per cent of what the candidates said. On average, participants exposed to the English version of the debate indicated that they understood 84.5 per cent of all candidate messages (minimum: 67.0 in Latvia; maximum: 90.6 per cent in Finland;  $F = 3.51$ ,  $df = 8$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Our sample is, of course, neither representative for any of the countries under investigation nor for young voters. As experiments in general, our data lack external validity. Nevertheless, our design is useful for assessing debate effects. First, different to survey data experiments have a high internal validity. We *know* that the participants of our study were exposed to the debate. Hence, shifts in attitudes have to be considered as debate-induced changes. Second, we have no indication that the processing of the debate and its effects are different for voters not included in our sample. Although various scholars argue that voluntary student samples are too 'narrow' to draw more general conclusions, other researchers have found that those samples are appropriate to study social behaviour (Druckman and Kam 2011; Exadaktylos *et al.* 2013). Since we are interested in the effect of the debate (and not in distributions of EU-attitudes), we contend that our findings are valid for young and well-educated European voters in general.

## Results

### *Debate effects on political cognitions*

With reference to H1 we expect that exposure to the Eurovision debate should increase the voters' ability to evaluate the candidates' personal and political profile. This expectation is clearly corroborated (see Table 1). Prior to the debate, the average viewer was only able to describe his/her feelings toward a

**Table 1.** Impact of the Eurovision debate on political cognitions.

	Before the debate	After the debate	Difference; significance of difference	Strongest negative effect	Strongest positive effect	Significance of country differences
Number of candidates rated by sympathy	2.38	4.99	+2.61, $p < .001$	+.95	+4.00	$p < .001$
Number of candidates rated by ideological position	2.16	4.84	+2.68, $p < .001$	+1.00	+4.05	$p < .001$
Number of candidates rated by position on EU integration	1.96	4.84	+2.88, $p < .001$	+1.37	+4.30	$p < .001$
Information about EU politics	-.30	-.04	+.26, $p < .001$	-.17	+.72	$p < .001$

Notes: *Sympathy of the candidates*: 'How would you describe your feelings toward the candidates of tonight's debate?'; respondents could indicate that they do not know. Based on this information, a six-point scale from 0 ('cannot describe a feeling for any of the candidates') to 5 ('can describe a feeling for each of the candidates') was created; Portugal has been excluded from the analysis of this question as the candidates' sympathy ratings were not asked in the Portuguese posttest survey. *Candidate ideological position*: 'In political matters people talk of 'the left' and 'the right'. What is the position of [candidate]?'; six-point scale from 0 ('do not perceive a position for any of the candidates') to 5 ('perceive a position for each of the candidates'). *Candidate position on EU integration*: 'Some say European integration (i.e., the economic and political cooperation between the member states) should be pushed further. Others say it has already gone too far. What do you think is the position of [candidate] on this issue?'; six-point scale from 0 ('do not perceive a position for any of the candidates') to 5 ('perceive a position for each of the candidates'). *Information about EU politics*: 'I am very well informed about EU politics'; five-point scale from -2 ('strongly disagree') to +2 ('strongly agree').

minority of the candidates ( $M = 2.38$ ). After the debate almost every respondent had an opinion about all of the five candidates ( $M = 4.99$ ). This increase is statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). The same pattern holds for the candidates' political positions. Before the debate, respondents could state an ideological position for, on average, 2.16 candidates and on EU integration for, on average, 1.96 candidates. After the debate, ideological respectively EU positions are reported for, on average, 4.84 candidates. These increases (+2.68 respectively +2.88) are statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). Although there is a positive impact of debate exposure for both the personal and the political profile of the candidates in all countries, the effect varies considerably across countries. For all three variables the country-specific impact of the debate is significant ( $p < .001$ ).

We also expect that exposure to the Eurovision debate should increase the perceived level of information about EU politics (H2), which is confirmed by our analysis. Overall, the level of subjective information increases from -.30 before the debate to -.04 after the debate. This shift of .26 scale points is statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). The maximum effect is +.72, while the strongest

**Table 2.** Impact of the Eurovision debate on perceived candidates' ideological positions and positions on EU integration.

	Before the debate	After the debate	Difference; significance of difference	Strongest negative effect	Strongest positive effect	Significance of country differences
<i>Ideological position</i>						
Juncker	6.56	6.63	+0.07, $p > .05$	-1.94	+2.33	$p > .05$
Schulz	4.01	3.83	-.18, $p < .05$	-2.00	+1.00	$p > .05$
Verhofstadt	6.10	6.00	-.10, $p > .05$	-3.00	+1.50	$p > .05$
Tsipras	2.83	1.87	-.97, $p < .001$	-5.40	+.80	$p < .05$
Keller	3.94	2.64	-1.30, $p < .001$	-2.83	+1.08	$p > .05$
Candidate polarization	4.46	6.24	+1.78, $p < .001$	-.06	+4.40	$p < .001$
<i>Position on EU integration</i>						
Juncker	5.77	6.60	+.83, $p < .001$	-2.75	+3.00	$p < .001$
Schulz	6.34	6.78	+.44, $p < .001$	-1.79	+1.80	$p > .05$
Verhofstadt	5.44	6.56	+1.12, $p < .001$	-1.75	+3.25	$p > .05$
Tsipras	5.65	5.74	+.09, $p > .05$	-2.00	+2.33	$p > .05$
Keller	6.24	6.80	+.56, $p < .01$	-2.50	+6.00	$p > .05$
Candidate polarization	3.54	4.09	+.55, $p < .001$	-4.75	+1.73	$p < .01$

Notes: Analyses are based on subjects evaluating the respective candidates before and after the debate;  $N_{\text{ideology}} = (285; 511)$ ,  $N_{\text{EU Integration}} = (269; 474)$ . *Candidate ideological position*: 'In political matters people talk of "the left" and "the right". What is the position of [candidate]?'; eleven-point scale from 0 ('left') to 10 ('right'). *Candidate position on EU integration*: 'Some say European integration (i.e., the economic and political cooperation between the member states) should be pushed further. Others say it has already gone too far. What do you think is the position of [candidate] on this issue?'; eleven-point scale from 0 ('European integration has already gone too far') to 10 ('European integration should be pushed further'). *Candidate polarization*: absolute difference between the candidate perceived as ideological most left and the candidate perceived as ideological most right respectively between the candidate perceived as most in favour of further EU integration and the candidate perceived as most critical of further EU integration.

negative effect is  $-1.7$ . Again, our results indicate that reactions to the debate differ significantly across countries ( $p < .001$ ).

The Eurovision debate did not only help recipients to develop first-time attitudes towards the candidates. We also see that respondents who already had an opinion about the contenders shifted their perceptions of the candidates' ideological positions and of their stance on EU integration (see Table 2). With respect to ideology, all candidates are perceived to stand further to the left after than before the debate (with the exception of Juncker). For Schulz ( $p < .05$ ), Tsipras ( $p < .001$ ) and Keller ( $p < .001$ ), these change are statistically significant. In addition, the perceived ideological polarization among the candidates has increased in the wake of the debate. The average ideological distance between the candidate perceived as most to the left and the candidate perceived as most to the right increases from 4.46 to 6.24 scale points ( $p < .001$ ).

Furthermore, the debates helped citizens to develop and sharpen their views about the candidates' positions on EU integration. All candidates are perceived as more pro-EU after the debate. Except for Tsipras ( $p > .05$ ), all changes are statistically significant. In addition, the debate provided viewers with information helping them to distinguish the candidates. As a consequence, the perceived polarization between the contenders has significantly increased from, on average, 3.54 to 4.09 scale points ( $p < .001$ ).

### Debate effects on motivations

We also hypothesized that watching the debate will positively affect the motivations underlying electoral participation. In particular, exposure to the debate should lead to an increase in campaign interest (H3) as well as to a stronger sense of internal efficacy (H4). We can confirm both hypotheses. With respect to internal efficacy, we observe a significant increase from .19 before the debate to .26 after the debate (Table 3). The shift of +.07 scale points is statistically significant. Still, in four out of 24 countries, we observe that internal efficacy has decreased. The maximum effect is  $-.33$ . In contrast, exposure to the debate has stimulated an increase in internal efficacy in the overwhelming majority of countries. The maximum effect is  $+.41$ .

In addition, we see a significant increase in campaign interest. Starting from 1.83 scale points before the debate, campaign interest rose by .26 scale points to 2.09 scale points after the debate. In each of the countries under investigation, campaign interest has increased. The smallest effect is  $+.04$ , the largest  $+.70$ . Although in most countries the impact of the debate on motivation turned out to be positive, the size of the effects significantly differ across countries for internal efficacy ( $p < .001$ ) as well as campaign interest ( $p < .01$ ).

### Debate effects on political attitudes

With respect to political attitudes we argued that the importance attached to EU issues is likely to rise if citizens were exposed to the Eurovision debate (H5). In addition, we have claimed that attitudes towards the EU should become more favourable as a consequence of debate exposure (H6). H5 can be confirmed. The share of respondents who indicate that the most pressing political problem at the domestic level should now be solved at the EU level increased from 44.5 per cent before the debate to 52.9 per cent after the debate (Table 4). The increase of 8.4 percentage points is statistically significant. However, in three out of the 24 countries under investigation, we observed the opposite

**Table 3.** Impact of the Eurovision debate on motivations.

	Before the debate	After the debate	Difference; significance of difference	Strongest negative effect	Strongest positive effect	Significance of country differences
Internal efficacy	.19	.26	$+.07, p < .01$	$-.33$	$+.41$	$p < .001$
Campaign interest	1.83	2.09	$+.26, p < .001$	$+.04$	$+.70$	$p < .01$

Notes: *Internal efficacy*: (a) 'Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on.'; (b) 'I have a pretty good understanding of what is going on in politics.'; five-point scale from  $-2$  ('strongly disagree') to  $+2$  ('strongly agree'); after item a) has been reversed both variables were put together into an index running from  $-2$  ('low internal efficacy') to  $+2$  ('high internal efficacy'). *Campaign interest*: 'And to what extent would you say are you interested in the current European election campaign?'; four-point scale from 0 ('not at all') to 3 ('very').

**Table 4.** Impact of the Eurovision debate on political attitudes.

	Before the debate	After the debate	Difference; significance of difference	Strongest negative effect	Strongest positive effect	Significance of country differences
Most important national problem should be solved by EU	44.5	52.9	+8.4, $p < .001$	-16.0	+37.5	$p < .01$
Position on EU integration	1.06	1.45	+39, $p < .001$	-.21	+1.58	$p < .05$
Evaluation of EU membership	.65	.63	-.02, $p > .05$	-.40	+33	$p < .001$

Notes: *Most important problem*: 'What do you think would be the most appropriate level to deal with those three problems that you have just mentioned?'; 1 = 'European level', 2 = 'national level', 3 = 'regional/local level'; code 1 was multiplied by 100, codes 2 and 3 are recoded into code 0. *EU integration*: 'Some say European integration (i.e., the economic and political cooperation between the member states) should be pushed further. Others say it has already gone too far. What is your opinion on this issue?' Eleven-point scale from -5 ('European integration has already gone too far') to +5 ('European integration should be pushed further'). *EU membership*: 'Generally speaking, do you think that your country's membership of the European Union is a good thing, a bad thing, or neither good nor bad?'; three-point scale from -1 ('bad thing') to +1 ('good thing').

trend. The strongest negative impact is -16.0 percentage points. Nevertheless, the perceived relevance of the EU increased in most countries. The largest effect is +37.5 percentage points.

In addition, the data indicate that debate exposure causes more pro-EU attitudes. In particular, the already rather favourable view towards European integration ( $M = 1.06$ ) has become more favourable as a result of debate exposure ( $M = 1.45$ ). This increase is statistically significant (+39 scale points,  $p < .001$ ). At the country level, the strongest negative impact is -.21, the largest positive effect is +1.58. In contrast to these findings, general support of one's country EU membership remained by-and-large unchanged ( $M = .65$  before vs.  $M = .63$  after the debate, difference: -.02 scale points,  $p > .05$ ). Hence, H6 can only partially supported. In seven out of 24 countries we observe a decline of EU support. The strongest negative impact of the debate is -.40 scale points. Nevertheless, in the majority of countries, respondents developed more favourable EU attitudes as a consequence of debate reception. The strongest effect is +33 scale points. For all variables under investigation we observe very different responses across the different EU member states, which pass the levels for statistical significance (at least  $p < .05$ ).

## Discussion and conclusion

Our data, which reflects the attitudes and perceptions of young and well-educated voters across 24 EU member states, suggests that exposure to the debate caused higher cognitive and political involvement. In particular, exposure to the debate enabled our respondents to make more informed

judgements of the candidates' personality and political profile (H1). Even those viewers who had an opinion about the candidates' ideological position and their stance on EU integration prior to the debate displayed a tendency to change their perceptions afterwards. Most noteworthy is that the perceived polarization among the candidates has increased due to debate reception. This is true for both dimensions. Despite some doubts expressed in the literature (see, e.g., de Vreese and van der Brug 2016), the debate clearly helped voters to distinguish the candidates running for Commission President. Moreover, watching the debate also increased the overall level of information about EU politics (H2), led to a heightened sense of internal efficacy, i.e., the belief that one can influence politics (H3), and a stronger interest in the campaign (H4). In addition, having watched the debate also led respondents to display stronger agreement with the claim that the most important political problems of one's own country should be solved at the EU-level (H5). Furthermore, viewers also tended to hold more positive evaluations about the EU. Since we could not observe this pattern for all EU-related attitudes, H6 can only partially supported.<sup>13</sup>

Overall, our results indicate that exposure to the Eurovision Debate has been conducive to infuse the EP election campaign with a dose of political competition, thereby tackling one of the professed causes of the EU's democratic legitimacy deficit. We have demonstrated that by watching the debate, our respondents have not only developed better knowledge about the candidates' stances on the EU and policy issues, they have also come to see the differences in these positions more clearly. The claim voiced by Follesdal and Hix (2006) that increased political competition instils cognitive involvement and lead to more informed vote choice is thus borne out. In contrast, the finding that exposure to the debate does not increase support of one's country EU membership runs counter to the expectation that positive coverage of the EU leads to more positive EU attitudes and hence an increase in the EU's perceived legitimacy.

Based on our results, which broadly support the argument about the positive effects of political competition on public support, we suggest that the debate format is an appropriate instrument to foster political debate, citizen involvement and support in the EU. As the recognition of the top candidates running for Commission President increases the likelihood to participate in the 2014 EP elections (Schmitt *et al.* 2015), exposure to the debate can also have highly desirable behavioural consequences. From this perspective, EU pundits should press for a wide and prominent coverage of TV debates among 'lead candidates' in future EP elections. The 2014 debate can thus serve as a starting point for developing a tradition of televised debates, which already exist in many democracies. This format is particularly important for EP elections, because debates among political leaders competing for political office can serve as a common point of reference (see also Benoit 2014: 4)

for all European citizens, when otherwise the number of EP election campaigns matches the number of member states. Hence, such a debate can foster an EU-wide campaign format by providing a common frame for national campaigns. In addition, future televised debates will offer exciting opportunities for political communication research on EP election campaigns. Unlike previous effect-analyses focusing on, e.g., the impact of (national) EP campaign spots, (national) EP campaign posters, or (national) media coverage of the EP campaign, a debate among leaders running for Commission President provides the opportunity to compare the impact of an uniform campaign stimulus across different EU member states. Moreover, we have shown that bringing together research on political campaigns in general and TV debates in particular with research on the EU's democratic credentials offers ample opportunities to scrutinize claims that have hitherto not been subject to systematic empirical exploration. We are thus positive that research on the effects of campaign information, such as TV debates, not only improves our understanding about the mechanisms underlying EP campaign effects, but also about their implications for the legitimacy of the EU's political system.

Of course, our data and research design have some limitations. Although our experimental design leaves little room for speculations about how young and well-educated votes react to a debate among political leaders in the EU, we have no empirical evidence about how other groups of voters were influenced by exposure to the debate format. Based on results from debate research, we assume that we rather underestimated the potential impact of the debate. Existing research indicates that debate effects are stronger for voters with lower levels of education (see, e.g., Maier and Faas 2011). One crucial step to remedy this shortcoming is to use the format of representative survey, including an item about whether or not a respondent was watching the debate. This would enable us to find out about the impact of the debate on other groups of voters. In addition, survey data could provide us with insights about who actually watched the debate. Second, the effects we found cannot be generalized to the public-at-large. The media neither provided an appropriate stage for the debate, nor did media broadcasters put a lot of effort into covering this event.<sup>14</sup> As impressive as it may sound that the Eurovision debate was broadcasted by 55 TV and nine radio channels as well as streamed on 88 websites across the EU and beyond (European Broadcasting Union 2014a, 2014c), most of the media channels airing the debate were, at best, small, second-rate or highly specialized news-channels, which tend to attract only a limited viewership. Moreover, in some member states the debate was accessible only via internet-live-stream or broadcasted the next day (see online appendix 2). Although the moderator of the debate, Monica Maggioni, was keen to stress that the debate would be highly attractive to voters – she argued that the candidates would have the 'chance to tell 400 million voters why they should get Europe's biggest job' (see Maier and Faas 2014: 4) – the available audience ratings were rather

poor in most countries (see online appendix 2).<sup>15</sup> Compared with the viewership of TV debates preceding national elections, the Eurovision debate fared poorly. For example, the TV debate in the run-up of the 2013 German national election attracted 17.7 million viewers (Gscheidle and Gerhard 2013: 565). In contrast, the Eurovision debate was watched by 160,000 viewers, less than one per cent of the national debate audience in Germany. Despite some selective audience rating-successes in individual countries, such as Cyprus, the media missed an opportunity to put the European elections in the limelight. In the event that debates between the top candidates running for Commission President will become a feature of future EP election campaigns, the media should definitely increase their coverage of the event and provide airtime in more established programmes to increase the audience ratings. Of course, this criticism also applies to national political parties, which are the main actors in the campaign and, until now, have displayed little enthusiasm to highlight the importance of the debates (see Franklin 2014). Third, not all EU member states are included in our study and some of the sample sizes are small. To obtain a more complete picture for the EU subsequent studies should include all member states with a sufficient number of cases. Increasing the number of observations would also offer the opportunity to run more sophisticated data analyses (e.g., multi-level analyses) and to uncover country-specific response patterns. Since our results suggest that there are cross-cultural differences, this could be a very promising path for even more rigid testing in the future and for establishing cross-cultural experimental work as a line of research. Finally, from the purview of democratic accountability, it is important for voters to know where political decisions originate in order to be able to assign responsibility. It has been demonstrated in the literature that access to more EU-related information increases the accuracy of citizens' responsibility attributions (Hobolt and Tilley 2014: 148), thus fostering democratic accountability. Our findings suggest that the debate has made our respondents more informed about the EU and led to increased awareness of its relevance for problem-solving. This should, as a result, enable them to 'better ... navigate the complex institutional landscape of the EU' (Hobolt and Tilley 2014: 149). While this is potentially good news from a democratic accountability perspective, our study does not lend itself to sweeping generalizations. Whether or not the Eurovision Debate can be seen as a modest step towards reducing the democratic accountability deficit necessitates further experimental or survey-based research.

## Notes

1. See Franklin (2014: 9–10) for a critical assessment of the institutional change adopted in the Lisbon Treaty. He expects that it is rather unlikely that national

parties will design their campaigns around the issues highlighted by the different candidates running for Commission President.

2. See, e.g., <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/editorial-on-the-importance-of-the-eu-election-for-european-democracy-a-971766.html>; accessed 21 February 2016; <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/eu-elections-2014-a-vote-for-europe-or-simply-a-chance-to-put-the-boot-in-9406013.html>; <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-22904941>; accessed 29 May 2015.
3. At the same time, increasing competition could also carry negative consequences for the EU's democratic legitimacy. In particular, since political competition creates winners and losers, losers might not 'accept the winning coalition as legitimate' (Hix 2008: 188). Moreover, others argue that enhanced political competition unleashes a 'sleeping giant' (van der Eijk and Franklin 2004: 32), by activating pro or anti EU-orientations, especially when debates revolve around constitutive issues, which relate to the EU's institutional trajectory or its membership base (see Bartolini 2005).
4. For a transcript of the debate see Maier and Faas (2014).
5. In most instances, the debate was watched on TV on 15 May 2014. In some countries, the debate was broadcasted via an Internet live-stream, but not on TV. In addition, in some states the debate was videotaped and broadcasted the next day (see online appendix 2). Due to technical reasons (e.g., because the university was closed when the debate was aired live on TV) recipients in the Czech Republic, France, Romania (Cluj), and Sweden watched the videotaped debate.
6. The remaining 8.2 per cent of the sample started with the simultaneous translation but had to switch to the EBU version due to either bad translation or technical problems.
7. In general, the questionnaires were in English. In some countries, the questionnaires were translated in the native language.
8. Overall, these respondents did understand the debate very well, as their answers show. Only four of these respondents indicated that they understood only about half of the debate. The exclusion of these respondents from data analysis does not affect our results.
9. In seven countries, recipients additionally had the opportunity to spontaneously evaluate the candidates during the debate. To do so, they used a web-based RTR push button system (for a description of the system see Maier *et al.* 2016). Using this system, individual positive and negative reactions to candidate messages were recorded on a second-by-second basis. Real-time response measurement of candidate messages was successfully implemented in Germany, Poland, Slovenia, and United Kingdom including 210 participants. As it has been demonstrated that using RTR technique in general neither distracts people from following the debate nor increases attention to the debate (Maier 2012), it seems unlikely that this treatment will affect the variables in focus of this paper.
10. It has been shown that in experimental studies with self-recruited participants having a very high level of general interest in politics questionnaire-induced pretest-posttest differences are very rare (see, e.g., Lupfer and Wald 1979). In addition, our pretest-questionnaires show for specific debate-related questions that the specific knowledge is rather low to non-existent. Against this backdrop, the pretest-questionnaire is unlikely to activate pre-existing knowledge.
11. We have tested the existence of pretest-posttest differences for a control group for the design that has been applied to the European debate in the context of

the 2013 German Federal Election (the data can be downloaded via [www.gesis.org/wahlen/gles/daten/](http://www.gesis.org/wahlen/gles/daten/); study number ZA5711) and did not find any significant changes for campaign interest, political efficacy, and for different measures of EU-related attitudes for the control group.

12. An analysis of the unweighted or differently weighted data indicates that our weighting procedure does not cause an exaggeration of debate effects: About half of the observed influences are slightly stronger if we do not weight the data or if weight all countries equally whereas the other half is slightly weaker. Furthermore, applying other weighting strategies does not change the reported results substantially. The only exception is that Tsipras is perceived as significantly more in favour of EU integration after the debate than before if these data are not weighted or if we weight all countries equally ( $p < .05$ ). In the data presented in Table 2 this effect is insignificant. In addition, country differences tend to be more often statistically significant if no or an alternative weighting procedure is used. The results for these alternative weighting procedures are provided in online appendix 3.
13. Our data analyses also show that the reactions to the debate were far from homogenous across the different EU member states: The between-country differences of the measured debate effects display statistical significance for all variables included in our study. Since the goal of this contribution was to look at the aggregate picture, we can neither report nor discuss and explain the potential causes of the observed cross-country differences here, but these findings will need further exploration. In addition, our findings suggest that lessons about the impact of the debate cannot simply be transferred from one country to another. Obviously, the domestic context matters for the effect of campaign messages (see, e.g., Hobolt 2014).
14. For the debate media sweep surrounding the debate, see European Broadcasting Union (2014b).
15. To our knowledge there is no information about the total reach of the debate.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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