

What are European elections for?

*A user's guide to the 2009 European Parliament
elections in the United Kingdom*

**Stuart Wilks-Heeg and Andrew Blick
Democratic Audit**

29 May 2009

Democratic Audit
Eleanor Rathbone Building
Bedford Street South
Liverpool
L69 7ZA



<http://www.democraticaudit.com/>

Foreword

A recent survey carried out for the European Parliament found that British voters were among the least likely in the EU to vote in the forthcoming European elections, and most likely to express a lack of knowledge about the European Parliament's role. British voters also showed the lowest levels of recall of media coverage of the European Parliament's activities.

In light of these findings, this report is intended as a guide for anyone with an interest in the forthcoming European elections, whether as a voter, a candidate, a canvasser, a journalist or a student. It is hoped that the report will make some small contribution to bridging the gap between the issues which our MEPs debate within the European Parliament and the issues which dominate European election campaigns in the media and 'on the ground'.

In no sense does this report seek to influence how people will vote in the election on 4 June. The core messages of this report are twofold. Firstly, Democratic Audit wishes to encourage all registered EU voters resident in the UK to exercise their right to cast a ballot. Secondly, in light of the purpose of these elections – which is to select UK representatives to sit in the European Parliament – we would urge voters to consider which of the many political parties on the ballot best represents their own views on the challenges facing the European Union in the early 21st century.

Simon Burall

Chair, Democratic Audit Board of Trustees

May 2009

What are European elections for?

Executive Summary

A democratic paradox?

British voters have rarely shown much enthusiasm for European elections. In the first five sets of European elections, held from 1979-1999, turnout in the UK was firmly at the bottom of the European Union (EU) league table. In autumn 2008, 79 per cent of British citizens polled by Eurostat said that they would be unlikely to vote this time around.

Since the Eurostat research was carried out, UK domestic political debate has shifted quite radically in light of the accusations of British MPs abusing the system of parliamentary expenses. The potential implications of these events for the outcome of the June 2009 elections have been widely debated, including the possibility that smaller parties could gain significantly from any loss of support for the main three UK political parties.

This course of events points to a possible democratic paradox. If the UK's current domestic politics prompts greater than usual voter interest in the 2009 European elections, the potential message being sent from UK voters to EU decision-makers could prove highly misleading at best. This report therefore poses a simple question: 'what are European elections for?'

The democratic deficit

In seeking to answer this question, the report highlights the continued existence of a democratic deficit in the EU, despite the progressive strengthening of the European Parliament's role in relation to other EU institutions. It suggests that this deficit shows signs of widening as a result of the disjuncture between European and domestic politics, because:

- The issues on which European political parties, sitting MEPs and candidates are seeking a mandate are rarely those which dominate media and public discussion of the elections within the UK;
- Low turnouts and low levels of interest in the European elections in the UK serve to further disconnect British voters from the MEPs who represent them in the European Parliament.

Small parties may gain

Since the introduction of proportional representation (PR) for European elections in the UK in 1999, overall levels of support for the largest two parties have been squeezed. Smaller parties have gained seats, and have proliferated on ballot papers. In 2009, many UK voters will be offered a choice of up to 15 parties, as well as independents.

With voters possibly considering wider voting options than at previous European elections, the report examines the possible electoral outcomes based on five alternative scenarios of changes in voting share in the English regions. These are *hypothetical*

scenarios, almost all of which assume that voters could defect from the main parties in large numbers and that support for UKIP may fall compared to 2004. *Should these assumptions apply*, these projections indicate that:

- Among the small parties standing, UKIP, the Green Party and the British National Party (BNP) have a realistic chance of winning seats in the European Parliament;
- Under three of the five different scenarios for which we have projected outcomes, the Greens would gain up to four additional MEPs, and retain their two existing seats;
- Under four of the five different scenarios, the BNP would gain at least one seat in the European Parliament. Under one scenario, there would be BNP candidates returned in up to five separate English regions.

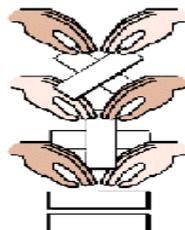
The prospects for the BNP

The possibility of the BNP securing its first seats in the European Parliament has been the most dominant issue in UK media coverage of the elections. In light of these discussions, the report suggests that:

- While the BNP have a sufficient base in 5 or even 6 regions to make a realistic challenge for seats, their core clusters of support dissect the English regional boundaries on which the European constituency boundaries are based;
- As with other small parties, levels of support for the BNP are likely to be underestimated by recent opinion polls;
- Estimated regional thresholds which the BNP will need to reach to secure an MEP do not sufficiently account for the possible collapse of support for larger parties;
- Regional variations in the impact of the recession on manufacturing employment could be the crucial factor in determining levels of support for the BNP.

Small parties in Europe

The report also summarises the financial resources available to MEPs and considers the possible options for small UK parties seeking to cooperate with other ‘sister’ parties across the EU. Smaller parties which are in a position to join forces with broadly similar political parties elected in other EU member states and establish an official political group in the European Parliament can leverage further resources and potentially make an important impact in the Parliament.



Democratic Audit
Eleanor Rathbone Building
Bedford Street South
Liverpool
L69 7ZA

<http://www.democraticaudit.com>

Introduction

From 4-7 June 2009, for just the seventh time in history, electors across the European Union will vote for their representatives in the European Parliament. Voters in the UK will be among the first in Europe to have the opportunity to cast ballots, with polling stations opening on Thursday 4 June at 7am (British Standard Time). Scenes of UK voters queuing to cast ballots are, of course, unlikely. Likewise, among those who do vote on 4 June, only a tiny minority will spend the evening of Sunday 7 June waiting up for the first results from the UK and other EU member states.

Direct elections to the European Parliament were first introduced in 1979 in the nine member states of the European Economic Community (EEC), and have since taken place every five years on a fixed electoral cycle. It is clear that today's European Union has a far greater bearing on the lives of Europeans than its predecessor twenty years ago. In the late 1970s, the EEC was dominated by questions associated with the removal of tariff and trading barriers and the operation of a common agricultural policy among its nine member states. Since that time, the organisation has evolved into the 27-member European Union, with significant functions in areas such as global trade negotiations, environmental regulation, consumer protection, regional development, and labour market policy, and with a common currency and central bank operating across 16 of its Member states.

Despite the growing importance of the EU, however, it is virtually certain that the average turnout in this year's European Parliament elections will prove to be lower than in 1979. Meanwhile, public understanding of the role of the European Parliament remains poor, particularly in the UK. Given this context, the purpose of this briefing paper is to:

- explain the formal role of European Parliament elections and the Parliament's role in relation to other EU institutions;
- highlight some of the problems of democratic accountability raised by European Parliament elections;
- identify the key campaign issues, distinguishing between formal EU-level debates and the issues which are most dominant in media and public discussions of the elections in the UK;
- explain the electoral system used for the elections in the UK and consider the likely outcomes of the elections in the UK, including turnout, voting share and party representation in the European Parliament;
- assess the prospects for smaller parties, including the likelihood of the British National Party being returned to the European Parliament for the first time.

What are these elections for?

In simple terms, these elections provide voters across the European Union with an opportunity to return representatives to the European Parliament. The European Parliament is one of the four main EU institutions, alongside the Commission, the Court of Justice and the Council of Ministers, and the only one which is directly-elected. In total the UK will return 72 representatives to the European Parliament in 2009, with elections being organised on a regional basis.

However, confusion among voters about the purpose of elections to the European Parliament and about their likely consequences would be more than understandable. Elections to the European Parliament are elections like no other, as the following aspects of this imminent exercise in EU parliamentary democracy illustrate:

- Voting will take place from the 4-7 June 2009 across the EU's 27 member states using multiple different forms of proportional representation (including the use of two different varieties within the UK).
- In what is described by the EU as the largest trans-national election in history, a total of 736 MEPs will be elected by around 375 million voters to a single parliament in which 23 different languages are spoken.
- This single Parliament is, in fact, located in two different places, holding committee sessions in Brussels, but decamping for one week in every month to hold plenary meetings in Strasbourg.
- Virtually all MEPs will be elected to represent voters on the basis of national party tickets, but will be recognised within the European Parliament as members of formal, trans-national European Political Parties. Most MEPs will also join distinct political groupings within the European Parliament, in which political parties cooperate within more flexible coalitions.

There is also widespread confusion among voters about the powers of the European Parliament and its relationship to the other organs of the European Union. The European Parliament was historically weak compared to other EU institutions, and does not operate as a legislature as parliaments are conventionally expected to do in national parliamentary democracies. European legislation – which is implemented in all member states – is normally proposed by the unelected European Commission or the Council of Ministers, not the Parliament. Moreover, not all legislation requires the approval of the European Parliament.

However, the European Parliament has been strengthened as a result of a number of reforms over the past decade. There has been an increasing role for the Parliament in passing legislation in conjunction with the intergovernmental Council of Ministers, through the co-decision procedure. The key role for the Parliament is to scrutinise legislation proposed by the Council of Ministers or the Commission via its specialist

committees, which subsequently propose amendments on which the Parliament as a whole votes. The specialist committees can wield significant influence in their respective areas and it has been estimated that the dynamics of coalition building via party groups within the parliament enable around 50 per cent of amendments proposed by the Parliament to become law. In addition, the Parliament votes on whether to accept the EU's budget and has the power to veto the appointment of the President and members of the Commission, as proposed by the Council of Ministers.

If the European parliament is elected why do people talk about there being a 'democratic deficit' in the EU?

The precise nature of the EU's democratic deficit is much debated. The essence of the problem, however, is that the growing role of the EU across a wide range of policy areas has meant a decline in the influence and, in a number of policy areas, the sovereignty, of national parliaments. Although the European Parliament has grown in influence and stature, particularly following the introduction of direct elections in 1979, the key shift of power is towards the EU's executive organs, the Council of Ministers and the Commission. As Andreas Follesdal and Simon Hix point out, this creates a situation in which there is no identifiable electoral process which directly determines either the political leadership of the EU or the trajectory of the EU policy agenda.¹ In essence, the mechanisms for granting democratic mandates and for ensuring democratic accountability fall between two stools. Separate national elections, taking place at different points in time in each member state, ultimately determine the composition of the Council of Ministers, but tend not to engage significantly with EU policy issues. Yet, the EU's trans-European elections return MEPs to a parliament with limited legislative powers, on the back of largely national policy debates.

(...) the processes of electing national politicians and even the members of the European Parliament are not contests about the content or direction of EU policy. National elections are about domestic political issues, where the policies of different parties on issues on the EU agenda are rarely debated. Similarly (...) European Parliament elections are not in fact about Europe, but are 'second-order national contests'. They are fought by national parties on the performance of national governments, with lower turnout than national elections, and hence won by opposition and protest parties. At no point, then, do voters have the opportunity to choose between rival candidates for executive office at the European level, or to choose between rival policy agendas for EU action, or to throw out elected representatives for their policy positions or actions at the EU level.²

¹ Andreas Follesdal and Simon Hix (2006) 'Why There is a Democratic Deficit in the EU: A Response to Majone and Moravcsik', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 44 (3), pp. 533-562.

² Follesdal and Hix (2006), p.536.

In short, it is hard for those voting in European parliamentary elections to assess precisely what difference their vote can make to the functioning of the EU. Although the EU comprises a significant, and growing, source of law in each member state, national politics tends to be the principal influence on voting behaviour. Changes in the composition of the European Parliament do not lead clearly to changes in the conduct of the European Union; and the manner in which the Parliament reaches decisions remains complex and opaque. This tendency possibly makes the registering of a protest vote or supporting a party with a clear, single objective such as withdrawal, more tempting.

What are the key issues at these elections and what role does party politics play in a trans-European parliament?

If the discussion of European policy issues appears to be largely invisible in European Parliament election campaigns, it is not because such issues are absent. The European Parliament's current campaign to promote participation in the elections highlights ten key areas of policy debate in the EU, including energy policy, the regulation of financial markets, terrorism and security issues and securing an appropriate work-life balance.³ A recent EU-wide survey commissioned by Eurobarometer underlines the importance of many of these issues to voters across Europe, with concerns about economic and security issues ranking as priorities for voters across the EU.⁴

There is also a strong pan-European basis to party politics in the EU. The activities of political parties are increasingly coordinated on an EU-wide basis, both during election campaigns and within the European Parliament itself.⁵ Virtually all MEPs will be elected as representatives of a major political party within their own nation-state (e.g. the British Labour Party, the German Christian Democratic Union). However, most MEPs will also be members of European Political Parties, constituted as transnational groupings of 'sister' parties across the EU member states, such as the centre-left Party of European Socialists or the centre-right European People's Party. In turn, these European political parties, which receive direct funding from the European Parliament for their work, may also be constituted as, or participate in, looser groupings within the European Parliament. These groupings, which embrace all but around 30 MEPs, act as broad coalitions and may include MEPs from different European political parties, non-aligned national parties and independents.

³ See the European Parliament's website:

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2009/default.htm?language=EN&window_mode=5

⁴ Eurobarometer (2009) The 2009 European Elections Report:

http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_299_en.pdf

⁵ Simon Hix, Abdul Noury and Gerard Roland (2007) *Democratic Politics in the European Parliament*, Cambridge University Press.

It is also clear that the positions taken by the principal European political parties/groupings do offer contrasting policy programmes to electors in response to the issues which parties and electors seem to agree represent the major challenges for the EU. Indeed, the positions taken in the respective party manifestos for the European Parliament elections in the UK appear to offer a far starker choice between competing political and ideological perspectives than UK parliamentary elections. For instance, the UK Labour Party has adopted the pan-EU manifesto of the Party of European Socialists, 'People first: A new direction for Europe', which states:

The voters of Europe face a fundamental political choice in these European elections. (...) It is a choice between our vision of a progressive Europe in which citizens, Member states and institutions work together to address the issues of greatest concern to the people of Europe; or a conservative Europe in which the future of our countries and people is left in the hands of the market.⁶

By contrast, the UK Conservative Party's manifesto reiterates the Conservatives' promise to leave the European People's Party and instead form 'a new centre-right, non-federalist group in the European Parliament directly after the 2009 election'. In his foreword to the manifesto David Cameron claims:

Our new group will be pioneers of a different vision for Europe – a Europe whose diverse nations work very closely together; a Europe whose governments take their direction from their electorates rather than Brussels; a Europe that is in the hands of its people, not a bureaucratic and political elite.⁷

Beyond the main parties, the stance towards European integration tends to be more radical. In the absence of a common European Green Party manifesto, the UK Green Party puts forward the following vision for the EU in its manifesto:

Our vision for Europe seeks to replace the unsustainable economics of free trade and growth with the alternative of local self-reliance. We want to foster co-operation on issues of common interest, not establish international institutions for their own sake. Accordingly we are critical of many of the objectives built into the EU treaties, of the EU institutions and how they work, and of many particular EU policies. We believe many things done and decided in Europe might better be done by member states or by regions or localities.⁸

⁶ Party of European Socialists (2009) *People First: A New Direction for Europe*, PES Manifesto: European Elections June 2009, p.1: http://www.pes.org/downloads/PES_manifesto_2009-EN.pdf

⁷ The Conservative Party (2009) *Vote for Change: European Election Manifesto*, p.3: http://www.conservatives.com/Policy/European_Election_Manifesto.aspx

⁸ The Green Party (2009) 'it's the economy, stupid', The Green Party Manifesto for the European Parliament elections 2009, p.10: http://www.greenparty.org.uk/assets/files/EU_Manifesto_2009.pdf

Despite this (democratically) healthy range of perspectives on European integration, the European elections in the UK, as elsewhere in the EU, will not be fought primarily with reference to these contrasting visions for the future of the EU. Neither will the campaign focus significantly on the issues which MEPs will ultimately spend their time debating in the European Parliament. This does not render the European dimension of the campaign entirely irrelevant, however. A number of fringe parties in the UK and elsewhere will focus their campaigns on outright opposition to the EU. The potential for such parties to mobilise a significant proportion of voters should not be underestimated. For instance, the Danish People's Movement Against the EU has been represented in the European Parliament since direct elections began in 1979. Moreover, anti-EU representation in the European Parliament reached an historic peak following the 2004 European Parliament elections, when over 60 MEPs representing a variety of Euro-sceptic parties were returned across the continent. The bulk of these MEPs now sit with one of the two anti-EU groupings within the Parliament: the Union for Europe of the Nations Group, which currently has 44 MEPs, or the Independence/Democracy Group, with 22 MEPs.

Within the UK, such 'Euro-sceptic' sentiments also reached a peak in the 2004 European elections. In 2004, support for the two principal 'anti-EU' parties, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the British National Party (BNP), amounted to 21 per cent of the votes cast nationally, with UKIP winning 12 seats in the European Parliament. Moreover, since 2004, the number of parties standing in UK elections to the European Parliament on a specifically anti-EU or pro-EU ticket has proliferated, partly due to the splintering of UKIP. As a result, voters in Greater London will be presented with a ballot paper offering a choice between 15 parties, one-third of which are constituted specifically on the basis of their stance towards European integration. Thus, voters will be able for one of four Euro-sceptic parties (UKIP, 'United Kingdom First', 'Pro Democracy: Libertas.eu' or 'No2EU: Yes To Democracy'), or a strongly pro-European party ('Yes 2 Europe'). Most voters in the UK will be presented with a similar range of options, although the range of parties standing in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, in particular, is more restricted. Outside London, moreover, there is no overtly pro-EU small party to counter-balance the range of anti-EU parties on the ballot.

Despite the apparent depth of Euro-sceptic sentiment in Britain, however, the two issues which have dominated the campaign to date are clearly domestic political issues. The first, which became the dominant theme in media coverage of the elections during late April and early May, is the issue of whether the BNP could gain representation in the European Parliament. As early as 24 March, the Yorkshire Post reported views expressed by Rotherham MP Dennis MacShane that 'the chance of the party winning its first (European) parliamentary seat is very real as it taps into

frustration with other parties and the recession fuels discontent'.⁹ Writing in the *New Statesman* (20 April 2009), Matthew Goodwin and Robert Ford suggested that there is a 'good chance' that the BNP will secure a representative in the European Parliament in June.¹⁰ Similarly, in an article in *The Guardian* on the 29 April, the Labour MP Peter Hain warned that 'unless the rest of us get our act together, the British National party could easily win three seats - and quite possibly six or more - in June's European elections'.¹¹

The second issue, which has dominated UK media attention since early May, has been the furore over MPs expenses. The fallout from these revelations has resulted in widespread speculation that public outrage over the revelations will prompt a significant loss of support for Labour and, to a lesser extent, the Conservatives, in the European Parliament elections.¹² Meanwhile, some political parties such as the Green Party, have sought to underline their credentials as candidates in the European elections representing parties which have not been tarnished by the expenses scandal. This position has also been taken by the BNP, with the BBC reporting on 11 May that the party leader Nick Griffin was predicting that 'revelations about the finances of Westminster politicians would win his party six or seven MEPs at the elections'. Concerns that a desire among British electors to register a protest vote may increase support for the BNP has resulted in the unprecedented intervention of senior figures in the Church of England to discourage supporting the far-right party.¹³

How much public interest is their likely to be?

Based on past trends, turnout is likely to be around 45 per cent across the EU as a whole, but with significant variations between member states (see figure 1). Turnout is typically around 90 per cent in Belgium, where compulsory voting is in force, and around 75 per cent in Italy. Prior to 2004 UK turnouts were always the lowest among all member states, and were typically between one half and two-thirds of the EU average, as figure 2 highlights. Expansion of the EU since 2000 has raised the UK from bottom place largely by virtue of turnouts of under 30 per cent being recorded in a number of accession countries in Eastern Europe (see figure 1). As a result, the gap between turnout in the UK and the average turnout in all EU Members States narrowed significantly in 2004.

⁹ Jonathan Reed (2009) 'BNP could win seats in European elections, warns former Minister', *Yorkshire Post*, 24 March 2009, <http://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/BNP-could-win-seat-in.5101090.jp>

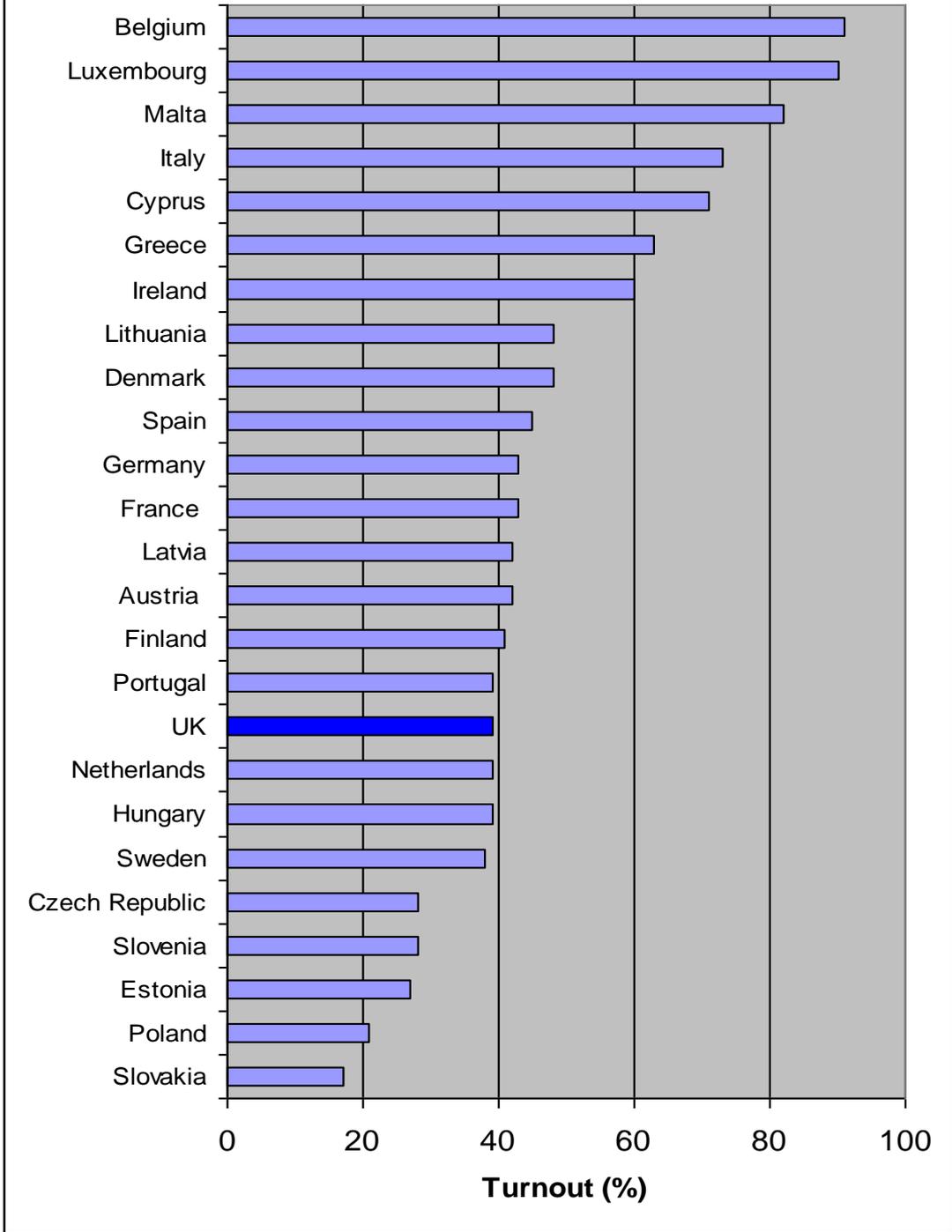
¹⁰ Matthew Goodwin and Robert Ford (2009) 'The BNP's Breakthrough', *New Statesman*, 20 April 2009, <http://www.newstatesman.com/europe/2009/04/bnp-european-party-british>

¹¹ Peter Hain (2009) 'We need to wake up and tackle BNP poison head-on', *The Guardian*, 29 April 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/apr/29/bnp-european-elections-peter-hain>

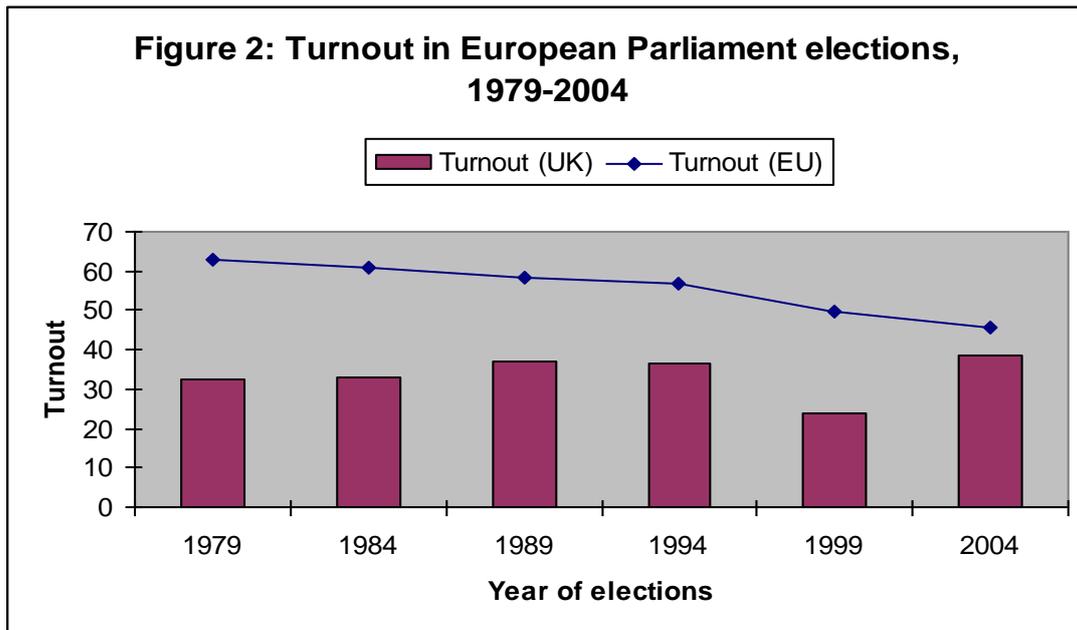
¹² Russell Jenkins (2009) 'Anger over expenses could push voters into arms of the BNP and UKIP', *The Times*, 18 May 2009, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article6307048.ece>

¹³ BBC News (2009) *BNP Rejects Church boycott call*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/8066000.stm>

Figure 1: Turnout in 2004 European elections, by Member State



Source: EurActiv.com (2009) 'European Parliament Elections 2004: Results', <http://www.euractiv.com/en/elections/european-parliament-elections-2004-results/article-117482>



Source: A. Mellows-Facer, R. Cracknell and J. Yonwin (2004) *European Parliament Elections 2004*, House of Commons Research Paper 04/50, 23 June, p.12.

An EU-wide opinion poll of voters commissioned by Eurostat in October 2008 reinforced this evidence of significant variations between member states in the level of popular interest in European Parliament elections. The polling data also highlight the extent to which UK voters are disengaged from the electoral process associated with the European Parliament, compared to their European counterparts. As table 1 shows, only 34 per cent of British respondents described themselves as having any interest in the forthcoming European elections, just 21 per cent said they would definitely vote and a mere 14 per cent were aware that the elections were taking place 2009, all among the lowest in the EU. This relative indifference to the forthcoming elections also reflected a wider tendency of UK voters to express low levels of knowledge of the European Parliament's activities and low levels of recall of media coverage relating to the Parliament. Notably, this low level of interest appears to be reinforced by a particularly negative view of the European Parliament, with UK respondents being the least likely among 27 EU member states to take a positive view of the European Parliament (17 per cent), describe it as important (52 per cent), or describe it as democratic (44 per cent).

These opinion poll data and past experience of European elections in the UK would suggest at first sight that a turnout in the UK much in excess of one third of registered voters is unlikely. The 2004 European elections recorded the highest ever turnout in the UK (38 per cent), but levels of participation were boosted by trials of all-postal voting in four English regions. However, current domestic political circumstances in the UK may well give rise to increased interest in the 4 June elections, particularly if large numbers of voters are minded to respond to recent events surrounding

parliamentary expenses by registering a protest vote for a small party. The fact that the European elections will also be combined with elections to local councils in most non-metropolitan areas of England, in which turnouts of 38-42 per cent are typical, is also likely to boost participation, if only marginally. Under these circumstances, a turnout in the UK's European elections of around 40 per cent seems likely.

Table 1: Attitudes towards the European Parliament (EP) in October 2008 - percentage of survey respondents who ...

| | EU-average (%) | UK respondents (%) | UK rank (out of 27) | Highest ranked (%) |
|---|-----------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Consider themselves well informed about the EP's activities | 23 | 19 | 27 th = | 44 (Lux.) |
| Have a generally positive view of the EP | 34 | 17 | 27 th | 57 (Bulgaria, Romania) |
| Would describe the EP as 'democratic' | 66 | 44 | 27 th | 73 (Belgium) |
| Know that European elections are in 2009 | 26 | 14 | 25 th | 56 (Lux.) |
| Are interested in EP elections | 44 | 34 | 25 th = | 60 (Ireland, Netherlands) |
| Describe the EP as important | 70 | 52 | 27 th | 85 (Slovenia) |
| Will definitely vote in EP elections | 34 | 21 | 26 th | 61 (Belgium) |
| Recall recent news coverage of the EP | 44 | 28 | 27 th | 72 (Slovakia) |
| Would like to see the EP playing a more important role | 44 | 37 | 25 th = | 74 (Cyprus) |

Source: Eurobarometer (2009) *The 2009 European Elections Report*, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_299_en.pdf

How does the electoral system work? Does it benefit small parties?

Two different electoral systems are used for European Parliament elections in the UK. In England, Scotland and Wales, MEPs will be elected using a regional list system. In Northern Ireland they will be elected using single transferable vote (STV).

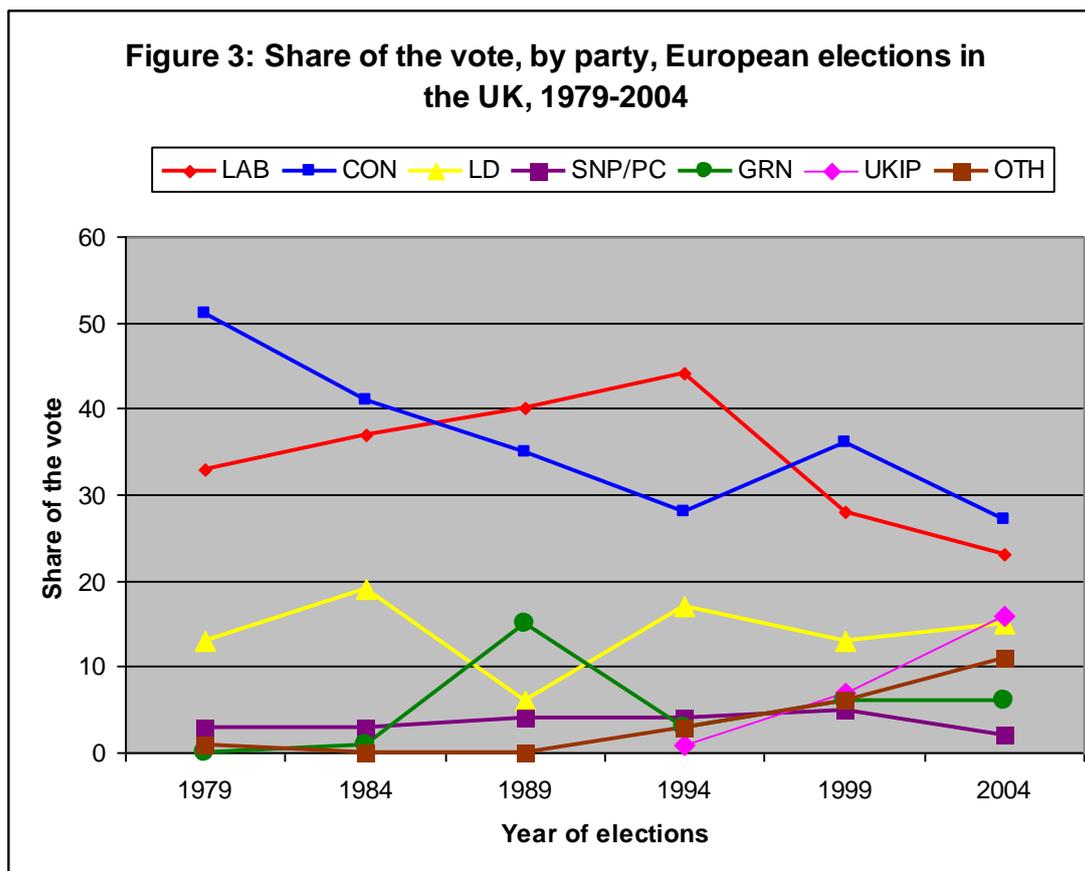
In England the elections are organised on the basis of regional constituencies, corresponding to the boundaries of the nine standard English regions, while Scotland and Wales comprise single constituencies. Each voter casts a single vote for a party list (or independent candidate) with seats subsequently being allocated on the basis of

the so called 'D'Hondt' formula. Under this particular form of proportional representation (PR), the share of the vote obtained by each party is first calculated, and the first available seat is then allocated to the candidate heading the list of the party with the highest overall share. In the second round of counting, the winning party's share of the vote is then divided by two (i.e. the number of seats won so far plus one), while the other parties' shares remain the same. Another seat is allocated on this basis, with the process continuing over as many rounds as there are seats available. Any party winning a lion's share of the votes will therefore win the largest number of seats, but the division of its vote each time it is allocated a seat (initially by 2, then by 3, then 4 and so on) enables parties with around 10 per cent of the votes to secure representation in an 8 seat regional constituency.

In Great Britain, the elections use a 'closed list' system, whereby the ranking of individual candidates within each party list has already been determined by the parties themselves. In eight EU member states, including Austria, Sweden, Italy, and the Netherlands, an 'open list' system is used whereby voters not only vote for a party list but can also express their preferences for individual candidates within that list.

In Northern Ireland, three MEPs are returned from a single constituency using STV. Under STV voters are asked to rank individual candidates in order of preference, expressing as many preferences as they wish, up to the maximum number of candidates who are standing. The votes are initially counted on the basis of first preferences, with candidates being required to obtain votes above a specific threshold, or quota, in order to gain election. The quota is determined, in this instance, by the so-called 'Droop Formula'. Under this formula, the number of votes a candidate requires to secure election is calculated as follows: the total number of valid voting papers cast, divided by the number of seats to be filled plus one. Thus, if there are six candidates, a share of at least one-seventh of the votes cast is required to secure election.

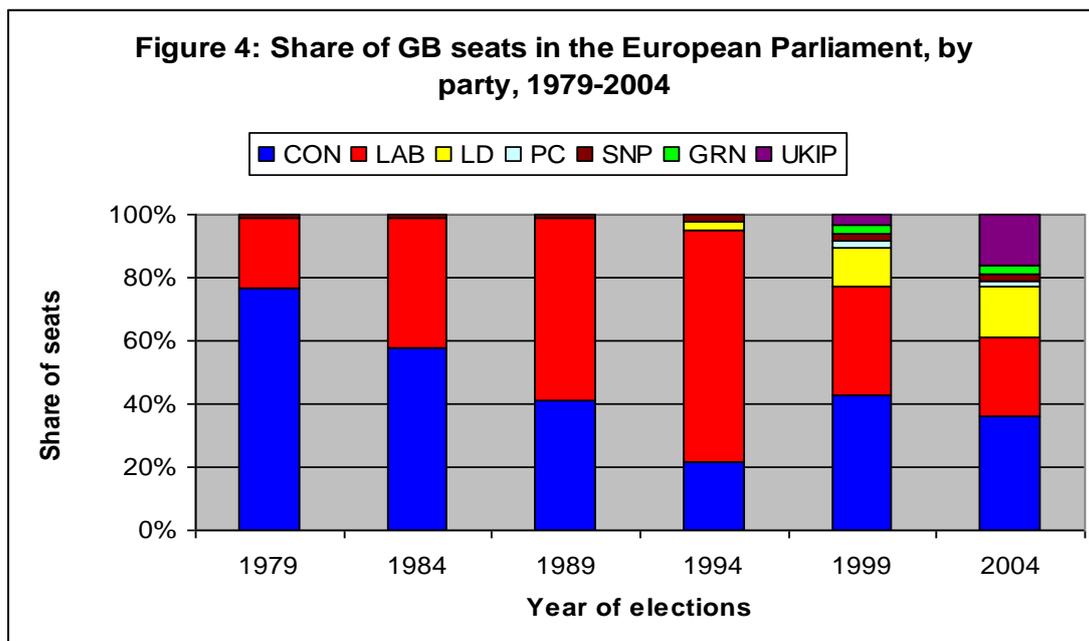
In the first round of counting, votes are counted on the basis of first preferences. Any candidate securing sufficient votes on the basis of first preferences is elected. The winning candidate's 'surplus' votes (i.e. those additional to the quota) are then available for redistribution. These surplus votes are calculated, and allocated, on the basis of the number of surplus votes available divided by the number of second preference votes cast. If transferring the second preferences of any winning candidates fails to raise sufficient candidates above the quota, the lowest scoring candidate is eliminated and the second preference votes for this candidate are 'transferred' to the remaining candidates on a similar basis. This process continues until all the seats have been filled.



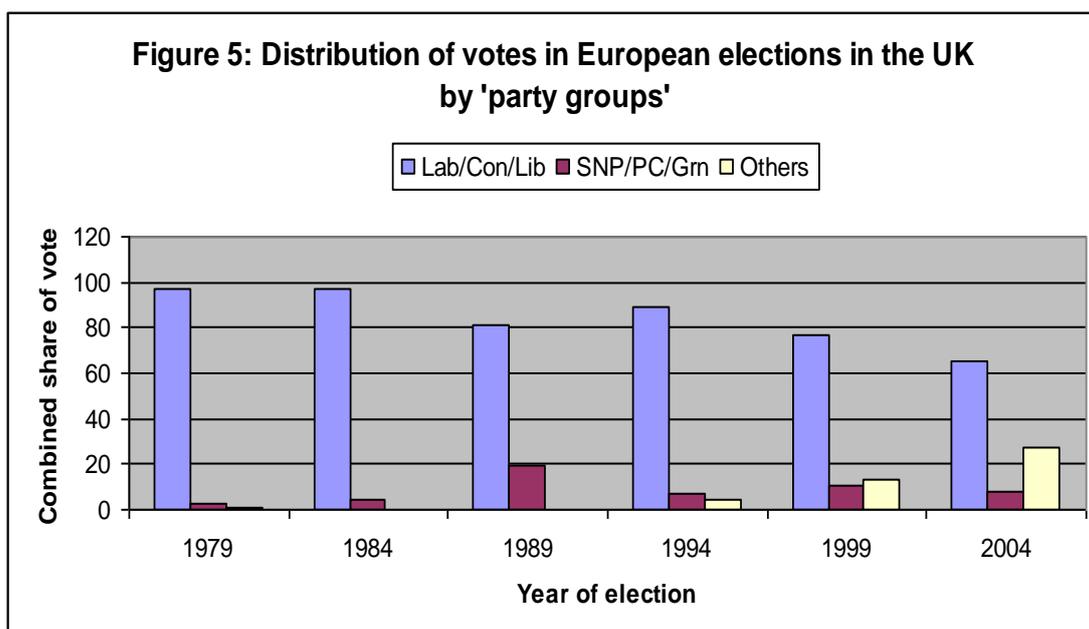
Sources: R. Cracknell and B. Morgan (1999) *European Parliament Elections - 1979 to 1994*, House of Commons Research Paper 99/57, 2 June; B. Morgan and R. Cracknell (1999) *Elections to the European Parliament - June 1999*, House of Commons Research Paper 99/64, 21 June; A. Mellows-Facer, R. Cracknell and J. Yonwin (2004) *European Parliament Elections 2004*, House of Commons Research Paper 04/50, 23 June, p.12.

In the UK, the introduction of the D'Hondt form of PR in European elections from 1999 has resulted in a dramatic fall in the share of the vote gained by the three main parties (see figure 3) and a sharp rise in the representation of smaller parties in the European Parliament (see figure 4). Indeed, as figure 5 shows, whereas the three main parties secured around 85 per cent of the votes in the 1994 European elections, by 2004 their share had fallen to just over 60 per cent. The main beneficiaries of this process to date have been the Liberal Democrats, who have seen a dramatic increase in their representation under the new system. In addition, the Green Party, Plaid Cymru and UKIP have all gained their first MEPs following the introduction of the D'Hondt regional list system in 1999, with UKIP making dramatic gains in 2004. Following the 2004 elections, 20 of the UK's 78 seats in the European Parliament were gained by smaller parties, with UKIP initially securing 12 MEPs.¹⁴

¹⁴ UKIP's representation has since been reduced to nine MEPs. During 2004 Robert Kilroy-Silk MEP resigned from UKIP and Ashley Mote MEP was suspended from the party following a conviction for benefit fraud. In 2007, Tom Wise MEP was also suspended from UKIP after being charged with embezzling EU funds.



Source: Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher (2007) *British Electoral Facts, 1832-2006*, Aldershot: Ashgate, pp.167-175.



Sources: Cracknell and Morgan (1999); Morgan and Cracknell (1999); Mellows-Facer, Cracknell and Yonwin (2004). See figure 3 for full details.

What are the likely electoral outcomes?

The outcomes of European elections in the UK, or elsewhere, tend to be difficult to predict, not least because of the potential for protest votes. Past elections to the European Parliament in the UK have recorded two significant 'protest votes', when

the Green Party averaged 15 per cent in 1989 and when UKIP secured 16 per cent in 2004. However, if the current economic and political climate points to the possibility of some form of protest vote in 2009, recent opinion polls suggest either a high degree of volatility in voting intentions or a high degree of inaccuracy in the polls.

Table 2 summarises the results of three opinions polls reported in the press from 13-22 May 2009. These polls suggest that the proportion of voters intending to vote for one of the three main parties varies between 65 and 79 per cent, with only the predicted levels of support for Labour showing a degree of consistency across all three polls, at 23-25 per cent. While the Conservatives lead in all three polls, their estimated support ranges from 28-34 per cent, while support for the Liberal Democrats is put at 14-20 per cent. However, it is in relation to the smaller parties that the picture is most uncertain, with estimated support for UKIP ranging from 6-15 per cent, the Greens 5-11 per cent and the BNP 1-4 per cent.

Table 2: Opinion polls: voting intentions in European elections

| | <i>Populus/The Times</i> 13 May 2009 | <i>ComRes/UKIP</i> 17 May 2009 | <i>ICM/Guardian</i> 22 May 2009 |
|--------------|---|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Conservative | 34 | 28 | 30 |
| Labour | 25 | 23 | 24 |
| Lib Dem | 20 | 14 | 18 |
| UKIP | 6 | 15 | 10 |
| Greens | 5 | 11 | 9 |
| BNP | 2 | 4 | 1 |
| Other | 8 | 5 | 7 |

Sources: *The Times*, 13 May 2009; *Sunday Express*, 17 May 2009; *The Guardian* 22 May 2009.

While voting intentions are likely to be volatile in the current political climate, it is important to note that opinion polls tend to be highly misleading when used as a basis for predicting voting behaviour in European elections. Opinion polls tend to provide especially inaccurate estimates of support for small parties. For instance, UKIP were only showing at around 2-5 per cent in opinion polls published on 26 May 2004.¹⁵ Two weeks later, on 10 June 2004, UKIP received 16.1% of the vote, up from 6.5% in 1999.

There are two key reasons for the mismatch between opinion polls and European Parliament election results. The first reason is that turnouts tend to be low. The Times/Populus poll published on 13 May 2009 noted that only 34 per cent of respondents described themselves as certain to vote. As such, as many as two-thirds of the responses would ideally need to be disregarded in order to predict electoral

¹⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2004/may/26/uk.localgovernment>

outcomes more accurately. Yougov polls in 2004 which isolated the voting intentions of those saying they were certain to vote in the European elections put the likely UKIP vote at 12%.¹⁶

The second problem with opinion polls is that they are rarely conducted on a scale sufficient to distinguish between large regional variations in the vote (see figure 6). Such variations can make a significant difference to electoral outcomes, particularly under the regional list system. In 2004, the UKIP vote ranged from 6.7 per cent in Scotland to 26.1 per cent in the East Midlands. Similarly, the BNP's share of the vote ranged from 1.7 per cent in Scotland to 8 per cent in Yorkshire and the Humber.

In many ways, it is therefore more useful to try to discern likely outcomes by interpreting opinion polls in light of past trends in voting behaviour in European elections. Smaller parties have steadily increased their share of the vote in European elections in the UK since 1994. It is unlikely that this trend will be reversed, since none of the three main parties would be expected to significantly increase their share of the vote following the fall out over MPs' expenses. Past elections suggest that the Liberal Democrat vote is likely to be relatively stable at around 15 per cent, and there are few grounds to suppose that Conservatives will vary much from the 33 per cent secured in 2004.

Of the three main parties, Labour is most likely to experience a significant squeeze in its share of the vote. Indeed, it is possible that the Labour vote may collapse, even against the poor showing in 2004. Labour's poor performance in opinion polls, the impact of the recession and the high-profile cases of Labour MPs accused of abusing the expenses system all render such a scenario more likely. In addition, there are anecdotal reports that Labour is struggling to recruit activists to leaflet and canvass for the June 4 elections. Among the smaller parties, it is UKIP which is most likely to experience a fall in electoral support, given the divisions which have emerged in the party since its exceptional performance in 2004. If voters are reluctant to switch to the Conservatives or Liberal Democrats, there may be an increase in support for the SNP in Scotland and Plaid Cymru in Wales. In the English regions, however, the most likely beneficiaries are the Green Party and the BNP. Given the very large number of parties standing, particularly in the English regions, it is also possible that votes 'lost' by any of the three main parties and UKIP may result in a 'fragmented' protest vote, shared by half a dozen smaller parties.

Using the 2004 regional results as a basis, we have modelled possible electoral outcomes using five different scenarios. A number of important 'health warnings' must be made in relation to these scenarios and the potential outcomes which they produce. In particular it must be stressed that:

¹⁶ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2004/may/31/uk.otherparties>

- These scenarios are strictly illustrative and non-exhaustive; a great number of alternative scenarios would be plausible.
- The projections reflect the assumptions made in each case about broad potential shifts in voting share. The assumptions made in these scenarios and the possible outcomes of such voting patterns are summarised below. If different assumptions were made, the outcomes would clearly be different.
- Each scenario assumes there is uniform ‘swing’ across all English regions. In practice, there are likely to be quite significant variations at a regional level.
- Scenarios 1-4 assume there is no change in turnout, while scenario 5 assumes a 10 per cent reduction in turnout. A significant rise or reduction in turnout could alter the outcomes quite radically, even if the same assumptions about transfers of votes between the parties were applied.
- In none of the scenarios does any party other than the Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, UKIP, the Greens or the BNP gain more than 3 per cent of the votes cast. It is, of course, possible that significantly larger numbers voters could switch to other smaller parties than our scenarios assume.

Scenario 1: The three main parties and UKIP lose votes, all small parties gain votes

Under this scenario, the Labour vote is assumed to be down by 35 per cent on 2004 and the UKIP vote by 30 per cent. Both the Conservative and the Liberal Democrats are assumed to lose 10 per cent of the votes gained in 2004. This scenario also assumes that the Greens gain significantly from the loss of votes among the main three parties, as do the BNP. While the BNP are also assumed to gain votes from UKIP, the bulk of former UKIP voters are projected to switch to other anti-EU parties.

In terms of seats, Labour and UKIP would incur heavy losses, of up to five seats each. The BNP could gain a single seat in as many as five English regions and the Greens an additional two seats (in addition to their existing two).

Scenario 2: Conservative and Liberal Democrat support is stable, but UKIP lose one quarter of their voters and the Labour vote collapses; the Greens and the BNP gain most.

Under this scenario, the Labour vote is assumed to be down by 40 per cent on 2004 and the UKIP vote by 25 per cent. Both the Conservative and the Liberal Democrats are assumed to have stable levels of support roughly equivalent to 2004. This scenario also assumes that the Greens, BNP and, to a lesser extent, other smaller parties gain significantly from the loss of votes among the main three parties and UKIP.

Representation under this scenario would again see heavy losses for Labour, on a similar scale to scenario 1, with the Conservatives losing up to two MEPs due to the

reduction in the number of seats available. UKIP and Liberal Democrat representation would be relatively stable. The BNP could gain seats in up to three regions (North West, West Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber). The Greens would defend their seats in London and the South East, while gaining an additional seat in the North West.

Scenario 3: Modest transfer from Labour to the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, with gains for the Greens and BNP also; UKIP vote halves, benefiting all anti-EU parties.

Under this scenario, the Labour vote holds up better and is assumed to fall by only 15 per cent compared to 2004. There are modest gains for the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats as a result, although the Greens are assumed to be the principal beneficiaries. The UKIP vote is assumed to halve, resulting in gains for the BNP and modest support for a range of anti-EU parties. Under this scenario, the BNP also pick up some votes from former Labour voters.

This scenario would see UKIP as the heaviest losers in terms of representation, down two-thirds compared to 2004. Labour could lose up to two seats, with the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and the Greens all gaining one additional seat each. The BNP would stand to gain up to two seats – one in the West Midlands and one in Yorkshire and the Humber.

Scenario 4: Large swing from Labour to Conservative, increased support for the Liberal Democrats but no rise in the Green vote. UKIP vote halves, benefiting the Conservatives, BNP and others.

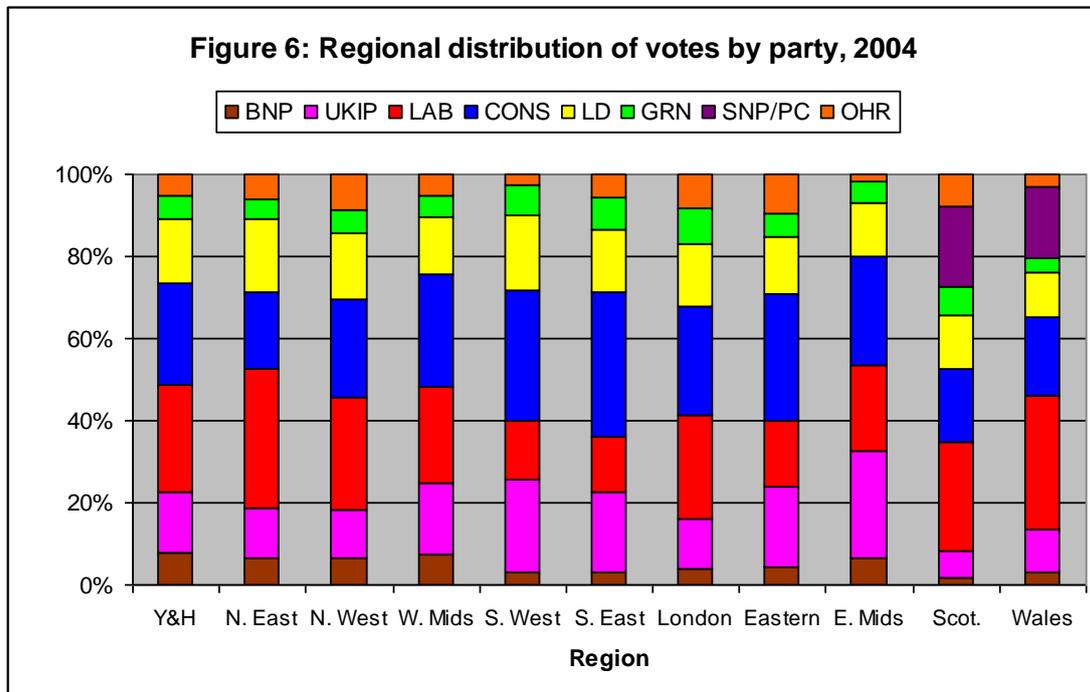
Under this scenario, the Labour vote collapses to just above half its level in 2004. There are big gains for the Conservatives and notable gains for the Liberal Democrats also. In addition, the UKIP vote is also assumed to collapse, to half of its 2004 level, with the Conservatives, the BNP and anti-EU parties being the principal beneficiaries. Support for the Greens is assumed to be equivalent to 2004.

This scenario would see UKIP lose two-thirds of their MEPs and Labour up to half of their existing representation. The Conservatives would be the principal beneficiaries, gaining as many as 10 seats. The BNP would be in a position to secure representation in one region only: Yorkshire and the Humber. The Greens would retain their existing two seats but would make no gains.

Scenario 5: Overall turnout is down 10 per cent compared to 2004, with large numbers of Conservative and Labour voters opting to stay at home. Support for all other parties is stable, but votes for parties standing for the first time are negligible.

Under this scenario, the number of votes cast for Labour and the Conservatives fall quite sharply, but the reduction in turnout reduces the impact in terms of representation. Because voters deserting Labour and Conservatives are assumed to simply ‘stay at home’, the increase in voting share for other parties is also relatively minimal.

This scenario would protect Labour’s representation, but the Conservatives would lose up to six MEPs, mainly because the party’s reduced vote would make it impossible to prevent losses in regions where the total number of seats has been reduced compared to 2004. The only party to gain seats would be the Liberal Democrats, who would increase their representation by up to two MEPs. The Greens would hold their existing two seats but would make no gains and the BNP would not secure representation in any of the English regions.

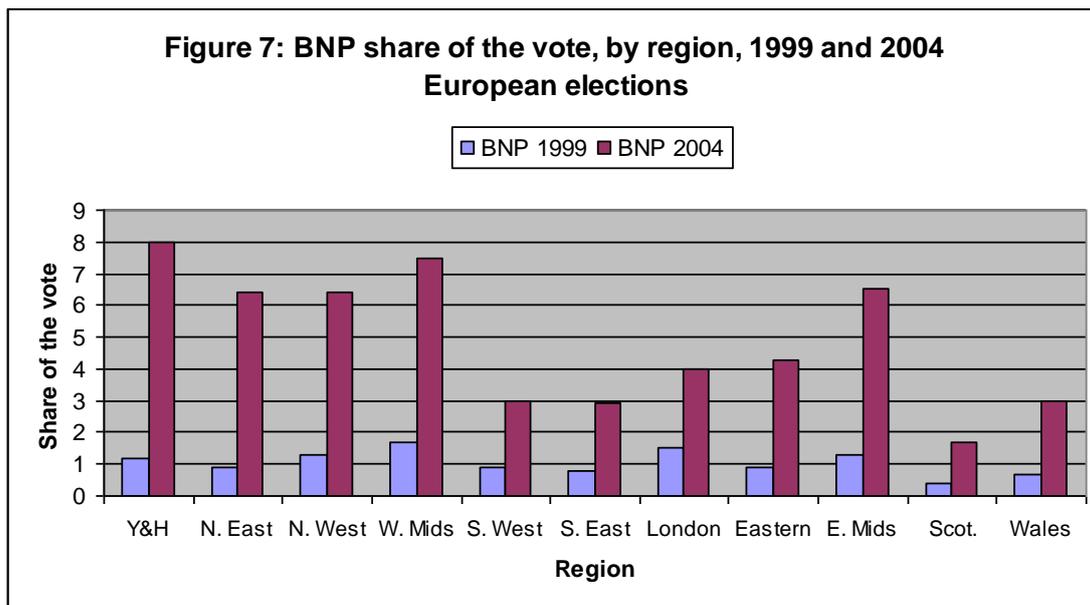


Source: Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher (2007) *British Electoral Facts, 1832-2006*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

How likely is it that BNP candidates could be returned to the European Parliament?

It has already been noted that the BNP vote has obvious regional concentrations. As figure 7 shows, while the BNP vote was three per cent in the South West and the South East in 2004, there were five English regions in which the BNP vote was above six per cent: Yorkshire and the Humber (8 per cent), the West Midlands (7.5 per cent), the East Midlands (6.5 per cent), the North East and the North West (both 6.4 per cent). Overall, the BNP’s performance in the 2004 European elections was a

significant improvement on their 1999 showing, with the party coming relatively close to securing seats in two English regions (Yorkshire and the Humber and the West Midlands). However, in 2009 the UK will return six fewer MEPs than in 2004 due to the reallocation of seats across the EU following the most recent enlargement in 2007, when Romania and Bulgaria joined as full member states. This has resulted in a reduction in the number of seats available in five English regions: the North West, the East Midlands, the West Midlands, London and the South West. As a result, the share of the vote required to secure election is likely to rise by 2-3 percentage points in these areas compared to 2004.



Source: Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher (2007) *British Electoral Facts, 1832-2006*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

Due to this ‘raising of the barrier’, and the variations in the number of seats available, it has been widely suggested that the BNP would require around 8.5 per cent of the vote to secure an MEP in the North West; 11.5 per cent in the West Midlands or Yorkshire and Humberside; 13 per cent in the East Midlands; and 17 per cent in the North East.¹⁷ However, the precise share of the vote required to win a seat will depend crucially on what happens to levels of support for the main three parties and UKIP, and whether votes transfer principally among these four or whether it is the Greens, the BNP or other smaller parties which gain. The scenarios we have modelled show that were the Labour vote to fall sharply, alongside large falls in support for either the Conservatives or UKIP, the chances of BNP representatives being returned could rise quite significantly in four regions, but notably not in the North West. Sharp falls in electoral support for a combination of the two main parties and/or UKIP would effectively serve to lower the assumed threshold which the BNP would have to pass in order to gain their first MEPs. Table 3 shows how the thresholds for BNP

¹⁷ <http://www.hopenothate.org.uk/2009/euro-election-system-explained.php>

representation in some regions could therefore be potentially be up to one percentage point lower than those assumed by the ‘Hope not Hate’ campaign.

Table 3: Assumed thresholds versus possible thresholds for BNP representation under scenarios modelled (% share of votes cast)

| | Assumed threshold | Possible threshold |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| North West | 8.5 | 8.9 |
| Yorkshire and the Humber | 11.5 | 9.9 |
| West Midlands | 11.5 | 9.8 |
| South East | 7.5 | 6.9 |
| London | 8.5 | 8.2 |

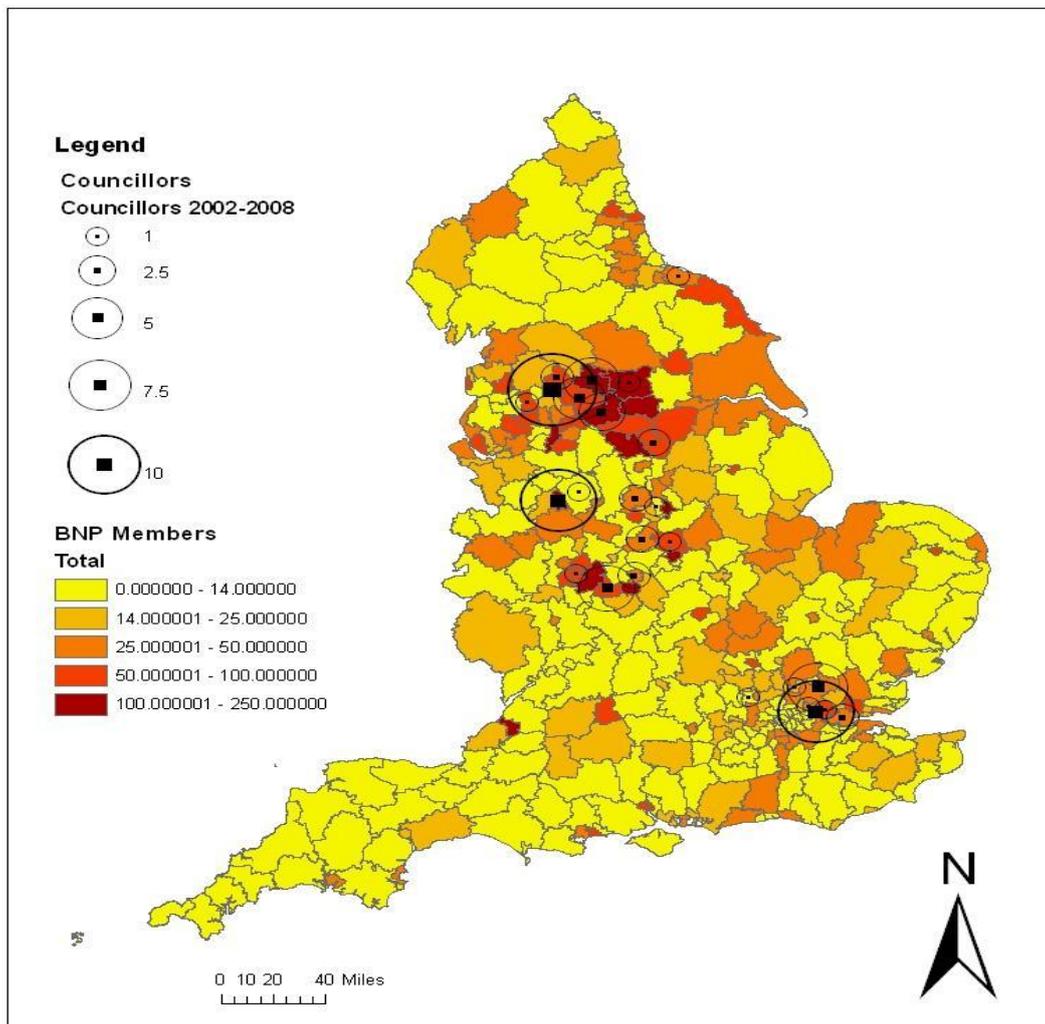
Sources: authors’ calculations; Hope not Hate, ‘The European Election: The BNP Threat’, <http://www.hopenothate.org.uk/2009/BNP-threat-european-elections.php>;

What factors might lead to an increase in BNP support?

While the BNP has joined other smaller parties in seeking to capitalise from the revelations surrounding MPs expenses, it is recent economic change which is most likely to foster support for the BNP. There are great uncertainties across the EU about how the current economic crisis will influence voting behaviour and it has been widely suggested that economic circumstances may result in an increase in the BNP vote. Regional contrasts in the impact of recession to date could prove to be a hugely important factor. In this regard, it is important to note that the economic downturn is likely to have accelerated trends already in place during the boom years, when (largely unrecognised) patterns of economic restructuring may have already begun to foster the growth in BNP support in England.

As map 1 illustrates, BNP success in local council elections from 2002-2008 was clustered in three areas: East Lancashire/West Yorkshire; the West and East Midlands and East London/southern Essex. There are also significant concentrations of BNP membership in these areas, which in some cases puts the BNP on a par with the three parties in these localities, particularly if levels of activism are considered. In many areas in which the BNP has prospered, the decay of local Labour Parties is particularly evident. In what were until recently Labour ‘heartlands’ such as Burnley, Stoke and Barking and Dagenham, virtually ‘one-party states’ for decades, Labour representation on local councils has collapsed. Labour no longer controls local councils in either Stoke or Burnley. In turn, the relative weakness of the other main parties, which generally did not have a base from which to capitalise on Labour’s decline, has provided rich-pickings for the BNP.

Map 1: BNP electoral successes 2002-08 and party membership 2007

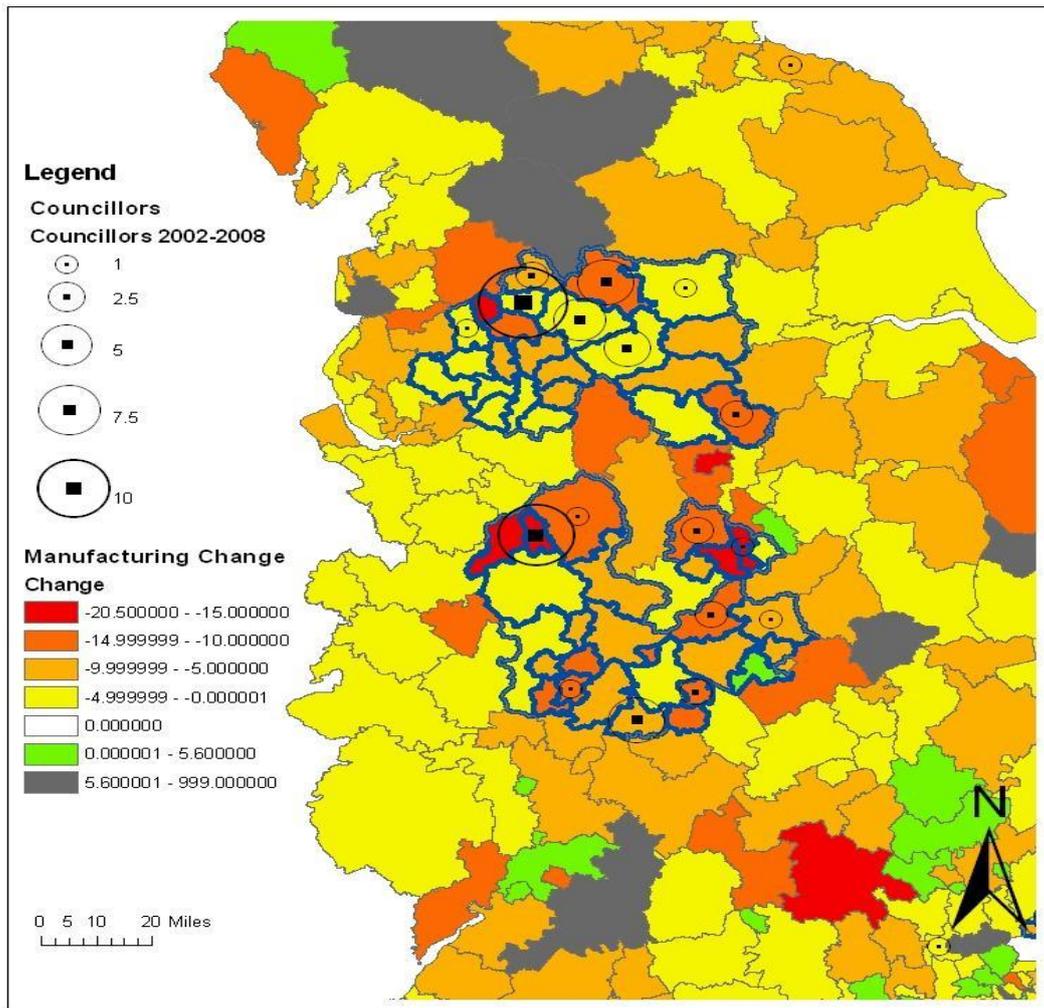


Base map: Crown Copyright

While party membership and activism are falling nationally, the decline of local Labour parties outside of England's major cities appears to be closely related to particular patterns of economic change over the past decade. During the period 1997-2008, there was an overall growth of employment in the UK of 3.6 million jobs, with this employment growth generally concentrated in the major cities. At the same time, overall levels of employment often stagnated or even fell in the districts around these cities, particularly where there was large-scale job loss in manufacturing. As map 2 indicates, such job loss has been concentrated along the central spine of England, with significant job losses in East Lancashire, West Yorkshire, Staffordshire, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. With cities and city-regions becoming the focus of regional

economic development efforts, manufacturing decline continued in the major urban centres, but did so from an already low base and was masked by a dramatic growth in service sector jobs, most notably in the public sector. Dramatic job losses beyond the metropolitan core generally went unnoticed. For instance, Stoke has witnessed the loss of around 20,000 manufacturing jobs over a ten year period from 1997-2007.

Map 2: Change in share of jobs in manufacturing, 2000-2007, central England



Base map: Crown Copyright; Data source: NOMIS.

In the vast majority of local authorities where the BNP has found electoral success, manufacturing employment has typically declined from a third or more of local employment to a fifth or less. In the 25 local authorities in which the BNP found electoral success from 2002-2008, there was a collective loss of 173,000

manufacturing jobs from 1997-2007, amounting to 16 per cent of all manufacturing job loss in England during this period. On average, these districts lost around 7,000 manufacturing jobs each, although in four cases (Bradford, Kirklees, Stoke and Sandwell) the figure was above 15,000. This pattern of job loss is significant because there is a strong class basis to BNP support, which is concentrated among the skilled and semi-skilled manual workers who traditionally constituted the core base of support for the Labour Party.

The concentration of BNP support in specific electoral wards within small-medium sized towns has enabled the party to secure representation on local councils. As a result, strong bases of BNP support and activism can be identified in the North West, the West Midlands, the East Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber. Of these, the East Midlands is the region with the clearest signs of growth in BNP activism and BNP electoral support. However, the geography of BNP support and activism may also limit the scope for the BNP to gain seats in the European elections, since the main clusters of BNP support cut across different regional constituencies. The crucial factor here is likely to be the extent to which economic developments since the onset of the credit crunch serve to boost the BNP's appeal.

This pattern of (previously unnoticed) job loss in parts of central England before 2008 is now spreading rapidly to large cities. The most obvious cases are Birmingham and Leeds. In Birmingham, in particular, there has been significant job loss in what remains of the city's manufacturing base, prompting a rapid rise in unemployment. The claimant count in the West Midlands has doubled to 5.3% since March 2005 and Birmingham is home to the only four parliamentary seats in the UK in which unemployment stood at 9 per cent or more in March 2009. In these circumstances, there is obvious potential for a spike in the BNP vote in Birmingham, augmenting existing levels of BNP support in the West Midlands region. If one fifth of the 84,000 people who have joined the registered unemployed in the West Midlands over the past 4 years become additional BNP voters, then the BNP will secure 16,800 more votes than in 2004. On an equivalent turnout to 2004, this alone would raise the BNP's share of the vote from 7.5 to 8.6%.

What difference can securing an MEP make to a small party?

For small parties, securing an MEP can have a significant impact. For any small party, the election of one or more candidates to the European Parliament is a significant political success and can offer a psychological boost to campaigns for local and national elections. The existence of one or more BNP MEPs, representing electorates of millions, would have a greater impact again, achieving substantial media attention nationally and in the region/s concerned. It would be used as evidence by the party

that it had a serious chance of winning a seat at Westminster in the forthcoming General Election.

Whoever was elected to the European Parliament for a small party would potentially become a prominent figure regionally and nationally and would be able to utilise their position to obtain publicity for the party and its objectives at these levels. The Green presence in the European Parliament has long been integral to its status as a national force, since the system used at general elections has to date precluded Green representation in the Westminster Parliament.

Any MEPs that might be elected for small parties would gain access to significant resources. After the June elections, all MEPs will receive the same salary of approximately E7,000 per month. In addition, while some of the details will change after the elections, each MEP is entitled to the following:

- A 'General expenditure allowance', to cover such outgoings as office and travel costs, of E4,202 per month;
- The right to claim, on the production of proof, for the cost of travel in order to attend official meetings of the European Parliament, both within the European Community and internationally;
- The right to claim for the cost of travel outside of their member state, undertaken as part of their duties but not to attend official meetings, up to a maximum of E4,148 per month;
- A flat-rate subsistence allowance of E298 for each day of attendance at official meetings of the European Parliament bodies on which the member serves (subject to signing an attendance register and being present for roll-calls);
- E149 per day, plus accommodation and breakfast expenses, for attendance at meetings outside the European Community, again subject to signing an attendance register; and
- Up to E17,540 per month to employ staff 'whom they may freely choose', plus various expenses including travel, social security contributions and tax paid.¹⁸

What difference can small parties make in the European Parliament?

If a small party becomes a participant in an official political group in the European Parliament, it will as a member of that group potentially share in further resources, as

¹⁸ European Parliament, 'Allowances paid to Members of the European Parliament', <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/parliament/expert/staticDisplay.do?id=39>

well as enhanced procedural rights within the Parliament. Members of groups receive more office space, staff and money for organising meetings and distributing information than they otherwise would. Groups can table resolutions and amendments to reports, propose debates, and have enhanced committee membership rights. As discussed above, the powers of the European Parliament have been enhanced in recent years through the co-decision procedure, which enables the Parliament to produce legislation in conjunction with the Council of Ministers. Once again, political groups have a key role in the co-decision process.¹⁹

Furthermore, beyond the financial and procedural details, as a participant in a cross-European alliance of like-minded parties a small UK party can potentially enjoy greater ability to wield influence across the continent of Europe and beyond. For instance, in the case of the BNP, given current circumstances in Europe, including the financial crisis and cohesion problems, an increase in support for radical nationalist parties across the EU is a distinct possibility at the coming European parliamentary elections. The successful election of a BNP candidate would be a significant contribution to any such trend; and would increase the potential viability of a radical nationalist group in the European Parliament.

What type of issues might a European Parliament political group including in it a UK small party seek to exert influence over? One possible shared objective of a radical national political group, which the BNP has stressed in its campaigning for the European elections, would be opposition to Turkish membership of the EU. Nick Griffin, who is heading the BNP list in the North West, has stated 'While we are in the European Union we most definitely, and above all else, oppose its expansion to bring 80 million low-wage Muslims into Christian democratic Europe'.²⁰ Perversely, another common feature of a possible radical nationalist political group could be hostility towards the European Union itself, a key characteristic of the BNP, which advocates UK withdrawal. In this sense, BNP involvement in the European Parliament would be negative in form, as it has been for the United Kingdom Independence Party (currently with 9 MEPs). UKIP, as a participant in the Independence and Democracy group, has focused, with a degree of success, on exposing irregularities within the European Commission and Parliament. However, the Greens/European Free Alliance, incorporating from the UK the Green Party, the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru, have been able to campaign on a more positive environmental and regionalist programme in the European Parliament.

It is highly unlikely that the presence of a small UK party such as the BNP within the European Parliament, either on its own or part of a group, would be part of a shift in the overall alignment of the Parliament impacting upon the major decisions it took.

¹⁹ Vaughne Miller (2009) *European Parliament Political Groups*, House of Commons Library Standard Note, SN/IA/5031.

²⁰ BBC News (2009) 'BNP starts Euro election campaign', 11 May 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/8043831.stm

Moreover the chances of a political group including the BNP being formed and sustained should not be exaggerated, though it has been reported that Nick Griffin has carried out preliminary discussions with various potential European allies.²¹ After June 2009, to be officially recognised, a political group must comprise a minimum of 25 MEPs, elected in at least seven of the 27 member states, a more stringent requirement than before. The tensions inherent in what might be termed a 'nationalist international' make the establishment of a durable group meeting these criteria problematic. The formation of the 'Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty' group in early 2007 was facilitated by the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the EU, which introduced new radical nationalist MEPs into the European Parliament. But by the end of the same year, following internal disputes, ITS collapsed with the withdrawal of the Party of Greater Romania.²² The chances of UKIP having a group to participate in are greater. However, it is unlikely that either UKIP or the BNP would form an officially organised and EU-funded European Political Party, along the lines of the European Green Party.

What should I do if I'm not sure how to vote?

Read the campaign literature carefully and, for further information, access the relevant Party manifestos, where available.

If you still aren't sure, try using this website to identify the political party whose positions on the EU are closest to your own:

<http://www.euranet.eu/eng/euranet/page/profiler/false>

²¹ Leon Symons (2008) 'BNP seeks to reactivate far-right alliance in European Parliament', *The Jewish Chronicle*, 24 October 2008.

²² BBC News (2008) 'EU far-right groups to form party', 25 January 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7210036.stm>